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Situating Reading, Shaping Divinity: Luce Irigaray, Interpretation, Theology

Each form sets a tone, enables a destiny,
strikes a note in the universe unlike any other.
How can we ever stop looking?
How can we ever turn away?

-Mary Oliver, "Staying Alive"

Situating Reading, Shaping Divinity:
Luce Irigaray, Interpretation, Theology

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Exergue¹: What Is a Thesis?

και διχοτομησει αυτον και το μερος
αυτου μετα των 'υτοκριτων θησει

-Matthew 24.51

Poet Mary Oliver reminds us that “each form sets a tone, enables a destiny, strikes a note in the universe unlike any other.”² What, then, is *this* form? and what tone does it set, what singular note does it strike? what is the destiny it enables?

Wanting to reflect on the activity in which I’m engaged, I consult *The Oxford English Dictionary*. A thesis is a putting, a placing, a putting-in-place, from the Greek τιθημι/τιθηναι, to put, place, lay, lay down, serve, set, make. A thesis is a proposition laid down, set (out), made, as a theme to be discussed and proved, to be maintained against attack; a statement, an assertion, a tenet, a *subject*. A thesis is a theme for a school exercise, a composition or essay; a dissertation to maintain and prove a thesis. A thesis is *thetic*, such as is (fit to be) placed; positive, affirmative,

¹ *Hors d’Oeuvre*, extratext, foreplay, facing, prefacing, bookend. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, Barbara Johnson, tr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, 1.

² Mary Oliver, “Staying Alive,” *Blue Pastures*, 69-70.

beginning with and bearing a thesis, against the negative, negation, darkness. A thesis is an exegesis, from ἐξηγεσθαι, an interpretation, a leading out of (darkness, error), an explanation of a bit (sentence, word) of writing, of (what is taken as) Scripture, an explanatory note, a gloss, an expository discourse. A thesis is performed by one of the three members of the Eumolpidae, in Athens, whose job it was to interpret the religious and ceremonial law, the signs in the heavens, and oracles. A thesis is a settling, once and for all, but spontaneously: θέτε οὖν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν μὴ προμελετᾶν ἀπολογηθῆναι (Luke 21.14).

A thesis, then, is both the thing placed *itself* and the *placing forth*; it is contained and container, signified and signifier, performed and performance, formed and form; it is its own referent; a thesis has a thesis and a thesis has a thesis.

A thesis is also the act of setting down the foot or the hand (or head) when beating time, and – tenor and vehicle – *is also* the ictus *itself*, the stressed syllable of, say, a foot in a verse. *But at the same time*, a thesis is *also* the lowering of the voice on an unstressed syllable, a whispered aside, as it were, a shadow, a darkness, thus effectually reversing other meanings of the word. It is *both* putting down one's foot *and* the time and space of suspension or indecision in between.

This thesis is/has all this. And as and with *its* thesis, Luce Irigaray's³ theological reflections, it seeks the shape and color of its own shadow, its antithesis, that which is placed against itself, against "commonsense." This is a *pièce à thèse*, with the dizzying resonances of that phrase, a place/room/play intent on putting into play questions that engage the public imagination and are often objects of passionate discussion. It takes as its thesis, that infinitely self-referential and -reflexive moment: that reading is a theological act⁴, representing and reflecting on ontological and ordinary questions, taking and showing all we are; that reading is beat *and* silence, solid *and* shifting fluid. It takes seriously such questions as: in what am I participating when I read, interpret? what are my goals? what is my understanding of what the process is and what it is to effect and what its effects are? The matter, then, is not so much, "Here is a text; let me read it," as, "Why am I reading *this* text? What kind of act was the writing of it? What question about it does it itself *not* raise? What am I participating in when I read it?"⁵

³ In faithfulness to her emphatic preference, I refer to Luce Irigaray throughout using not only her sexually neutral surname but also her given name, which is sexually inscribed and marked as feminine.

⁴ action / performance / speech act

⁵ These questions are suggested loosely by Barbara Johnson in *A World of Difference*, 3-4.

It can be argued that one of the insights and insinuations of recent thinkers has to do with the ways in which any society is composed of certain foregrounded practices organizing its normative institutions.⁶ The Matthean epigraphic inscription above suggests a perilously close connection between the disciplinary practice of placing a thesis (ῥησει) and the practice of discipline (διχοτομήσει αὐτον). The rhetoric of dichotomy is metonymically contiguous with the rhetoric of theses, and the consequent violence of that association isn't "merely" tropic but also bodily: the dismembered corpse – punishment here seems too sanitized a translation – *as* punishment, perhaps, but also perhaps as inevitability, will be put in the place of lies, μετα τῶν ὑτοκριτῶν.⁷

This thesis takes as its thesis a *body* of work that problematizes reading in such a way as *both* to analyze itself *and* to show that it has neither a self nor any neutral metalanguage with which to do the analyzing, thus calling out irresistibly for, precisely, analysis. That that call is answered by readings which emit their own paradoxical call-to-analysis results, in the context of any question of the act-of-reading, in a f

⁶ De Certeau, Foucault, and Bhabha are immediate examples of such.

⁷ This passage in Matthew comes at the end of a discourse on a theology of master/slave relations which Luce Irigaray reads to overturn, and just before the βασιλεια parable of the foolish and wise young women.

ield which places the would-be reader in a vertiginously insecure position.

How, then, indeed, can we ever turn away?

I. The Situation of Reading

Là, tu exagères un peu, là, tu charries.

-Luce Irigaray⁸

The Reading Lesson

I have read in a French weekly that some are displeased with *Mille Plateaux* because they expect, especially when reading a work of philosophy, to be gratified with a little sense.

-Jean-François Lyotard⁹

Nietzsche, one of Luce Irigaray's constant addressees,¹⁰ writes that reading is an art that "does not so easily get anything done; it teaches to read *well*, that is to say, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers."¹¹ Against the sensitivity and subtlety of these readers, I'm afraid,

⁸ Luce Irigaray, "Nietzsche, Freud et les Femmes," in *Le corps-à-corps*, 52.

⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?," 71. (*Mille Plateaux* is a work of "philosophy" by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.)

¹⁰ In *Marine Lover: Of Friedrich Nietzsche* and "Nietzsche, Freud et les femmes," among other places; and with, among others, of course, Heidegger, Freud, and Lacan.

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 5. Pascal further cautions: "Quand on lit trop vite ou trop doucement on n'entend rien." *Pensées*, 564.

is the much more commonplace understanding of interpretation and of reading – indeed, understanding of “understanding” – that *if we read*, even though the opacity or denseness of a text initially may rebuff us, there suddenly will occur a moment of illumination when everything will become clear. This is the promise described by those who taught us to read, the prize fruit held behind the back of any text. Upon this enlightenment, we will be able to reread the text and see how what was opaque or dense was necessary to build up the triggering mechanism of illumination, of “understanding.” The pedagogical implications of such injunctions, promises, expectations aside (one of the more insidious being the separation of readers on the basis of their success or failure in achieving illumination), it is interesting to consider the underlying assumptions of this description of the reading process.

To begin with, it opposes the immediately apprehensible darkness of *the sensible* to the eventuality of the great clarity of *the intelligible*, yet makes the first the condition and the means of access to the second. It relies on the well-known (yet complex) notion of expression which figures the immediately perceptible materiality of the text – its verbal component – as a means of access, a container yet a barrier, to the central core of meaning of the text. The verbal component needs to be overcome to reach

that core, but the overcoming itself is not easily described, for its achievement may depend more on the qualities and skills of the reader than, seemingly, on any specific steps that can be taken to ensure its accomplishment. Moreover, it is not the case that the core of meaning is somehow held permanently imprisoned within that materiality, but rather that it becomes manifest in a flash of intuition that illuminates the whole and motivates its necessity.

There appear then to be two competing notions of expression at work here: the first is based on the familiar model of the apparent and the hidden, where the hidden holds the key to the existential necessity of the apparent; whereas the second overcomes this model with an altogether different notion of expression whose matrix is lightning. In direct opposition to the inside/outside, contained/container dialectic of the first theory of expression and interpretation, the model of lightning proposes a perfect congruence between the expression and that which is expressed. Lightning cannot be said to be hidden before its manifestation, but rather it expresses *itself* (if the word still applies) fully in the instant of its illumination. In fact, it suspends the difference between the manifest and the manifesting, producing in its instantaneity a moment of perfect presence. However, the punctual brevity of its flash is such as to displace

its significance away from itself onto the surrounding darkness whose internal composition it reveals. Even if the eye were to train itself on the flash, and were it able to predict the exact moment and place of its occurrence, it would remain unseeing, for it would be blinded by the force of the light, so that it is not lightning itself that we wish to see but what its flash reveals, the inner configuration of the surrounding landscape and the forces at play within it. The eye remains trained on the darkness knowing it to hold a secret that the flash will disclose. The flash is not the secret but the occasion of the moment when all is in the light, the reward for peering into the dark.

Against this problematic commonsense conceptualization of reading are many alternatives which problematize the scene of reading, that diagnose the symptoms of investing the Text with the authority to mean, that do not assume words are transparent windows. These readings are not the representations of a preexisting object, nor the creation through discourse of an object that does not exist, but rather “the totality of discursive and non-discursive practices that brings something into the play of truth and falsehood and constitutes it as an object for thought.”¹²

¹² Michel Foucault, “Le Souci de la vérité,” 18.

Shoshana Felman offers one such alternative, based on her understanding, through Lacan, of psychoanalytic method.¹³ She suggests replacing the traditional method of *application* of any preconceived notion or method of reading with the radically different notion of *implication*. The reader brings to bear her analytical questions on the questions of the text, involves her contexts in the scene of textual analysis, and generates implications between, in the case of Luce Irigaray, philosophy and psychoanalysis and theology and literature (to begin with). She is a go-between, exploring and articulating the various (indirect ways) in which the domains do indeed *implicate each other*, each one finding itself enlightened, informed, but also affected, displaced, folded within, the other.¹⁴

What better thesis for a thesis, then, that sense-making apparatus *par excellence* which contains within its own definition the unmaking of any “sense,” than the work of an author who resolutely “abandons coherence, consistency, and noncontradiction as reflective of male anatomy”?¹⁵ The very form of an academic discourse, hypostasized in

¹³ See any of the five works by Felman I list in the bibliography.

¹⁴ See particularly Shoshana Felman, “To Open the Question,” 8-9. In its etymological sense, “implication” means “to fold within” (Latin: *im-plicare* = in + fold): it indicates, between two terms, a spatial relation of interiority. Application, on the other hand, is based on the presumption of a relation of exteriority, of hierarchy, of mastery.

¹⁵ Christine Pierce, “Postmodernism and Other Skepticisms,” in *Feminist Ethics*, 67.

theses, makes ideas such as those of Luce Irigaray difficult to describe and comprehend. In her articulation of what might constitute a feminist hermeneutic framework, Sharon Welsh writes that she agrees with Luce Irigaray: “emotion, interest, and desire motivate inquiry and shape thought – thus the importance of acknowledging forthrightly the role they play in our analyses.”¹⁶

Part of the power of Luce Irigaray’s writing – I cannot say “argument” – is the link she *implicitly* makes – that is, the *implication* she suggests – between sexuality and textuality. Her formulation of the female as bearer of imprints exposes the implications (in terms of sexual, economic, social, and cultural exchanges) of a textuality figured as female.¹⁷ Masculinist reading takes the female body as the symbolic site in which social meaning is concretized at the same time that any concrete, material specificity is *emptied out* in order to ensure the body’s service as a pure and proper vehicle.

Another reading possibility, to return to Felman’s suggestion, is one based not on the isomorphically repetitive binary phallic subjective economy of has/has-not – the Logic of the One – but rather on the mutual im-plication of difference, interacting and merging one with the other.

¹⁶ Sharon Welsh, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 8.

¹⁷ See Luce Irigaray, “Women on the Market,” in *This Sex*, 170-191.

Asked to account for itself, such a reading “cannot answer; she has already moved on [and] turned her back on her own thought, a kind of vaginal fold within herself.”¹⁸ The reality of reading is always corpo-real: a turn of interpretation is a fold of flesh; in this differently figured hermeneutic discourse, the reading lips, which speak, are always already the genital lips, enjoying their difference. “Irigaray’s (post)modern female body comes to synechdochically inhabit the lips.... The French *lèvres* is a catachresis which always necessarily also refers to the mouth.... Irigaray embodies female sexuality in that which, at this moment in the history of the language, is always figurative, can never be simply taken as the thing itself.”¹⁹

Because of the biological and epistemological snares inherent in the topology Luce Irigaray proposes, Felman problematizes the reading-scene further. She points out that while Luce Irigaray theorizes “the feminist question” on the levels not only of material, practical organization but also of the foundations of logos and thought – “the subtle linguistic procedures and in the logical processes through which meaning itself is produced” – it is not clear that the “otherness” of (W)oman can be taken for granted as positively occupying the un-thought-out, problematic locus

¹⁸ Andrea Nye, *Feminist Theory and the Philosophies of Man*, 195.

¹⁹ Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body*, 97-8.

from which “the feminist question” is being uttered to begin with. Felman asks repeatedly: “*how can one speak from the place of the other?*”²⁰

If ‘woman’ is precisely the Other of any conceivable Western theoretical locus of speech, how can the woman as such be speaking in this book? Who is speaking her, and who is asserting the otherness of the woman? . . . From what theoretical locus is Luce Irigaray herself speaking in order to develop her own theoretical discourse about the woman’s exclusion? Is she speaking the language of men, or the silence of women?²¹

Is it possible for woman to be *thought* outside of the masculine/feminine framework? Is woman other than opposed to man, other than sub(ject)ordinate to a primordial masculine model? Can difference be thought out as *nonsubordinate* to identity? Indeed, can thought break away from the logic of polar oppositions?

²⁰ Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want?*, 25, among many other places. As she points out, the problem is common to the revaluation of madness and to the contention of (W)oman, reminding the reader of the implications among the work of Foucault (*Maladie mentale et personnalité*, 1954, and *Folie et déraison*, 1961), Luce Irigaray (*Le Langage des déments*, 1973), and Felman herself (*La folie et la chose littéraire*, 1978) – emphases mine!

²¹ Shoshana Felman, “Women and Madness,” 4.

Finally, whatever the approach, and of course several others can be imagined, several difficulties arise immediately, difficulties that cut so deep that even the most immediate and, dare I say?, elementary task of scholarship, the delimitation of the corpus and the *état présent* of the question, is bound to end in confusion, not necessarily because the bibliography is so large but because it is impossible to fix the boundaries. Of course such predictable difficulties have not prevented many writers on theology or biblical studies or feminism from proceeding along theoretical rather than pragmatic lines, often with great success. I would argue, though, that in all cases this success depends on the power of a system – philosophical, religious, ideological – that invariably remains implicit but that determines an *a priori* conception of what is “theological” or “biblical interpretive” or “feminist” by starting out from the premises of the system rather than from the thing itself – the theological thing, the biblical studies thing, the feminist thing – if such a “thing” indeed exists. This last qualification is of course a real question which in fact accounts for the predictability of the difficulties I have alluded to: if the condition of existence of an entity is itself particularly critical, then the theory of this entity is bound to fall back into the pragmatic. The difficult and inconclusive history of these systems – theology, biblical studies,

feminism – suggest that this is indeed the case: the attempt to treat theology or biblical studies or feminism theoretically may as well resign itself to the fact that it has to start out from empirical considerations.

A Question of Style

Cette voie est la seule formation que
nous puissions prétendre à
transmettre à ceux qui nous suivent.
Elle s'appelle: un style.

-Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (458)

To begin... To confess...

I am *seduced* by Luce Irigaray: by her oeuvre, her voice, her lips, her body, the textual/sexual/contextual inscribing and inscription. *By her style*. By her “rhetorical conduct.”²² I like not only the opening I sense her theorizations make possible, but also the scandal they have caused; I like not only *what* she says, but *how* she says. And it is this reading-effect, the shape of this *how*, as distinguished from the *what*, from any straight-

²² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, 163. Is this so, then, of any g*d-talk, any discipline?, I wonder, after Foucault.

forward theoretical enunciation, that I propose primarily to explore. This seduction, this call to reading, is an introduction/ induction/indoctrination into a training or discipline that does not present its reader with theories and systems to be analyzed and critiqued but, rather, that suggests *in its style* different ways of thinking and engaging, that offers the possibility, even, of *re-examining how* (and what) we read, *how* (and what) we think, *how* (and who) we are. Luce Irigaray's call is for a type of reading (and writing) that engages in active interpretation which is not only the product of traditional philosophical rationality but which is also a process that is sensuous and bodily. It is a way of reading that opens onto the other of a text. Why is her text so compelling?

Luce Irigaray confesses to the fact of *her own* seduction. In answer to her imaginary interrogator's question, "What method have you adopted for this research?," Luce Irigaray claims that "the option left to [her] was to *have a fling with the philosophers*"²³: that is, to enter into a lovers' discourse, in which "the lover is not to be reduced to a simple symptomal subject, but rather that we hear in the voice what is...intractable"²⁴; to become, for instance, Nietzsche's *Marine Lover*. This

²³ Luce Irigaray, "Questions," in *This Sex*, 150.

²⁴ Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, 3.

fling is double (dichotomous?): the first part is mimicry, playing her role, “destroy[ing] with nuptial tools,” mirroring and serving as mirror for the subject; the second part is irony, what doesn’t fit into the first economy, what is left over, the supplement of blood and waste and divinity, non-oneness, non-representation, “*the other of sameness*.”²⁵ With her double-edged love letters to the philosophers, Luce Irigaray intro(sed)uces a new mode of inter(textuality)course. She whispers allusively: in “The Fecundity of the Caress,” an intimate description of her textual relationship with Lévinas, or *L’oubli de l’air*, her double-mimetic deconstruction of Heidegger, or “Divine Women,” ostensibly her reading of the Mélusine myth and Feuerbach, proper names appear only buried in the texts, if at all.²⁶ She executes a double gesture of taking up an other position, of attempting to speak from the other side, *and also* of appropriating another’s text by reproducing it in a debilitating way. She engages in passionate dialogue with texts *and also* accuses them of violence, of violating her.

²⁵ Luce Irigaray, “Questions,” in *This Sex*, 151-52.

²⁶ Note her engagement with Nietzsche in *Marine Lover: Of Friedrich Nietzsche*, for instance. Except for the title, Luce Irigaray does not mention Nietzsche’s name until the last few pages of the book. One of the major texts to which she is in relation thus is kept unnamed, as if in the position of women in philosophy and history. Similarly, the name of Jacques Lacan, her analyst, her training analyst, her *maître*, is *never* mentioned in *Speculum*, her most sustained discourse on psychoanalysis. Perhaps it was this strategic move, this mimesis of Freud’s and Lacan’s relegation of the question of the feminine to the margins of discourse, that got Luce Irigaray booted from Lacan’s *École freudienne*.

Luce Irigaray's style, deploying her double mimesis, is at once "literary-romantic" and "recognizably reasonable," an exemplum of a style of philosophizing summoned up by the general critique of humanism in France.²⁷ Rhetoric assumes an *aggressive* role in her prose; Spivak writes that "the writing of the woman called Luce Irigaray is *written like writing* and should be read that way."²⁸ The foregrounding of rhetoric in her writing reminds us that textuality is a practice, not a meta-practice. When we try to say what we do when we *read*, we tend to give rules or phenomenologic descriptions that misapprehend our practice. The idea that practice is to some extent ineffable – that, for instance, textuality *wouldn't* be the given topic for a thesis – indicates that our own textual practices are ineffable to ourselves, that the lenses through which we see our world remain invisible to us. This means, then, for example, that the discipline called Textual Methods is dangerous, since it implies that we know what it is we do when we perform a textual analysis. Text can no longer be thought of as representation except to the extent that those who produce texts generate a discourse of their representationality, but that is a descriptive finding about a text. A reading's position is not one of Seeing the Truth. Rather, the text can set an example which the

²⁷ Spivak, "French Feminism Revisited, Ethics and Politics," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, 74.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 75, my emphasis.

reader can choose to follow, a scenario not unlike cajoling someone new to the water to swim: here, move in the way that seems to me to work best; let me show you this. In either case, can one *say* how she reads, or how to read, or how she knows how to read? The reader is always liable to the same problem of ineffability as their objects. When we generate a theory of our practice, that is all we have done, however interesting; that generation, a “methodology,” is, itself, another practice. Such considerations enable us to get at another set of questions: what are the ideas that are doxic or beneath the threshold of discussability? In other words, what kind of things do we think we are doing such that we *imagine* we could develop a method, much less a whole line of thinking called methodology? Further, what do we think knowing is, such that we could develop a branch of thinking called epistemology?

The seduction of the text is mutual, a *folie à deux*, both “partners” participants, both subject and object. Codifying their methodology, the translators of Luce Irigaray’s *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* report that they “have respected these practices [of “idiosyncratic usage”] because we believe that it is only when Irigaray’s readers engage with her textuality that they fully experience what she is ‘saying.’”²⁹ How, then, will I

²⁹ Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill, Translators’ note, in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, viii. They go on to comment that “typography and format are such significant elements in the Irigarayan text.... [E]xtra spacing is often used to mark pauses for reflection, stages in the

respond to what Luce Irigaray is “saying”? What shape will this exploration take? What form will my response to her seduction – that is, what form will my seduction – take?

Much of my technique will be mimetic, my approach a mirrored-back intro(sed)uction, intended not so much as mimicry as hom(m)age, worrying over and teasing out the ways in which Luce Irigaray opens up the discussion of representing the other – and the possibilities that are at the same time closed off. I shall be wondering, then, in what ways is the possibility of interpreting “otherwise” *enacted* – and what is simultaneously excluded from the process of reading? And what is theological, or divine, about this movement of enactment and exclusion?

My hermeneutic framework will be an Irigarayan reading of Luce Irigaray, a setting-beside, a sitting-beside, to see what happens. Mimicking Luce Irigaray, “I shall be talking more or less freely.” My interpretation will be “at times...like a children’s story.”³⁰ Like the experience of fiction, like Luce Irigaray’s prose, my thesis plays on the stratification of meanings, narrating one thing as a way – as *perhaps the only possible way* – to tell something else; it delineates itself in a language from which it continuously draws effects of meaning that cannot be

unfolding of the argument, or parallelisms in the marshaling of examples in support of a thesis.”

³⁰ Luce Irigaray, “Belief Itself,” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 25.

circumscribed or checked. It is “metaphoric”; it moves elusively in the domain of the other. As de Certeau points out, “knowledge is insecure when dealing with the problem of fiction; consequently, its effort consists in an analysis (of a sort) that reduces or translates the elusive language of fiction into stable and easily combined elements.”³¹ Adding my admittedly one-sided story to Luce Irigaray’s, what can be constructed without *evaluating* her text as a reading of whomever she purports to be reading – or mine? Is it appropriate to hold Luce Irigaray’s text *accountable* as a reading of Mélusine, Feuerbach, Lévinas, Freud, Nietzsche? It is in the engagement of this *folie à deux*, this falling in love, that I come to articulate my own reading, my own theology.

Seduction is a site where Luce Irigaray’s two gestures meet. Checking her-self in the mirror, woman constitutes “a fabricated other that [she] will put forth as tool of seduction in [her] place.”³² The rest has yet to be unmasked, unveiled, or veiled, apart from the masculinized gaze. How does this description fit Luce Irigaray *the writer*? And how can one get at the crucially interrelated questions: not only how does one read Luce Irigaray, but how does Luce Irigaray read?

³¹ Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies*, 202.

³² Luce Irigaray, “Femmes Divines,” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 77.

Reading Luce Irigaray

“[Luce Irigaray’s] reenactment of philosophical error requires that we learn how to read her for the difference that her reading performs.”

-Judith Butler³³

“I set out to explore Irigaray’s anatomy not as referential body but as poetics, and I come to find precisely what I was seeking,” writes one of Luce Irigaray’s most devout readers, Jane Gallop.³⁴ Do we not, indeed, always find what it is we set out seeking? Do we not read only our needs, our desires? In my dance toward and around Luce Irigaray’s body of work, I have tried various approaches – and, indeed, engage many of them here. Beyond reading her work and critiques of it, I first made contact with Luce Irigaray via electronic mail, seeking some clearer, closer, less mediated connection. And then more: I met her, at the occasion of a philosopher’s funeral. And so I have wanted, beyond my conceit of referring to her *sexed* name, of *using* this “personal” association

³³ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 37.

³⁴ Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body*, 94.

in order to *credential* my reading, to stretch this acquaintance to *approve* of my interpretation – of, say, piecing together an “interview” out of the moments of our interaction. But this desire has led me to reflect the ways artifactuality has become internationalized – the actuality effect monopolized, artifactual power centralized in order to create events – and the ways in which it may be accompanied by advances in so-called live communication, taking place in so-called real time, in the present. The theatrical genre of the “interview,” for instance, is a propitiation, at least a fictive one, of this idolatry of immediate presence and live communication. And so newspapers will always prefer to publish an interview, accompanied by photographs of the author, rather than an article which will face up to its responsibilities in reading, criticism, and education. How can we carry on a critique of the mystifications of “live” communication – videocameras, satellite connections, MOOing, etc. – if we want to continue making use of it? In the first place, by continuing to point out, and argue, that live communication and real time are never pure: they do not furnish us with intuitions or transparencies, or with perceptions unmarked by technical interpretation or intervention. They are not perspective-free. And, of course, any such argument inevitably makes reference to a philosophy of interpretation. Further, Luce Irigaray,

in keeping with the dialectical emphasis of her thought and production, resolutely resists elaborating what she calls “a metadiscourse of Luce Irigaray.” As she says, “to offer commentary of a reflexive, critical sort” on her own writing would be to subject it to precisely the kind of logical formalization that forecloses dialogue and precludes the representation of sexual difference. In order to keep her text always open, she attempts to situate it “at the crossroads of a double *mise en forme*,” at or as the encounter between a literary formalization and a logical formalization and thus assimilable to neither. Her persistent interrogative constructions serve a comparable intent: the text is always open “onto new sense, onto future sense, and onto a potential ‘You,’ a potential interlocutor.”³⁵

Not that I’m taking the moral high road in interpretation by eschewing the “interview” form or some other narrative device: and then she said... For, of course, the choice of her texts, the choice of others texts, already so situates my interpretation that I cannot begin to “see” anything else.

The reading of Luce Irigaray – that is, both the *fact* and the *mode* of reading her work – is “highly contested” and “controversial.”³⁶ That

³⁵ Elizabeth Hirsh and Gary A. Olson, “‘Je-Luce Irigaray’: A Meeting with Luce Irigaray,” in *Hypatia*, 96.

³⁶ Frances Oppel, “‘Speaking of Immemorial Waters’: Irigaray with Nietzsche,” in *Nietzsche, Feminism and Political Theory*, 107, and Margaret Whitford, “Rereading Irigaray,” in *Between*

contest and controversy are on various fronts. First, there is the difficulty of placing her. As a feminist, a psychoanalyst, a powerful writer, and as a philosopher, Luce Irigaray cannot be situated very easily; “she is forever in between different fields, disciplines, levels of experience, and places of enunciation.”³⁷ Luce Irigaray’s writing is prophetic, oracular. Her prophecies are often appropriately dark; veiled in obscurity, they signal an intuition that a turning point in western culture may have been reached on account of what, one hopes, might be the beginnings of the (possibility of the) unrepression of the feminine. Luce Irigaray through the practice of her writing refuses the fiction/theory opposition, and in doing so refuses the authorial and authoritative subject/object opposition, in favor of an intertextual corps-a-corps. She does not argue a hypothesis, as theory does, but, more in a manner of fiction or poetry, demonstrates or enacts effects through the use of a battery of rhetorical strategies: repetition, polyvocality, allusion, ambiguity, contradiction, sensuous diction, mimicry, parody and irony, open-endedness. It is a *mise en cause*.

What do I mean by reading *her*? Her text? Her texts? Her career? Her reception? Her *effect*? She is much like Lacan, most of the other recent thinkers in whose debt she is, who trained her, and to and against whom

Feminism and Psychoanalysis, 106. Diana Fuss looks critically and at length at the attacks on Luce Irigaray’s work; see *Essentially Speaking*, 56-58.

³⁷ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 129.

she positions her writerly endeavor. Her writing has provoked serious questions of canonicity and of reception – what is it? where does it “fit”?³⁸ And these questions are as often a matter of tossing about a hot potato as they are competition to claim a favorite fruit. Because of her project of demonstrating the morphological marks of maleness imprinted on the imaginary of dominant western culture, feminists have given their attention, though many have come away with the sour taste of essentialism in their mouths.³⁹

While it is not at all clear how her texts should be read, it is clear that whatever reading one adopts, her analysis and strategy are not of the kind which impose themselves without considerable discussion – that is, contest and controversy. Luce Irigaray never sums up the meaning of her text or of any text on which she comments, “nor binds all her commentaries, questions, associations into a unified representation, a coherent interpretation. Her commentaries are full of loose ends and

³⁸ Which academic departments, for instance, consider Luce Irigaray a “subject”? It varies from institution to institution: French, Philosophy, Women’s Studies, Religion.... Or in which section of the store are her books shelved? There is a range here, too: I have seen them in Women’s/Gender Studies, Philosophy, Gay/Lesbian Studies, Psychology, and Literary Criticism.

³⁹ Luce Irigaray clearly answers the charges of her universalism/essentialism: “I can answer neither *about* nor *for* ‘woman.’ If in some way I were to claim to be doing this – acceding to it, or demanding to do it – I would only have once again allowed the question of the feminine to comply with the discourse that keeps it repressed, censured, misunderstood at best. For it is no more a question of my making woman *the subject* or *the object* of a theory than it is of subsuming the feminine under some *generic term*, such as ‘woman.’” Luce Irigaray, “Questions,” in *This Sex*, 155-56.

unanswered questions. As a result, the reader does not so easily lose sight of the incoherency and inconsistency of the text."⁴⁰ "Irigaray presents 'constructive,' poetic, exploratory texts capable of multiple readings and different associations. No two readings, even by the same reader, are identical. Her writings perform what they announce."⁴¹

Readings of her work also take interesting forms. Lynne Huffer, for instance, discusses the work of Judith Butler and J. L. Austin in traditional critical terms, then changes form completely, and *without comment*, when she turns her attention to Luce Irigaray -- competing with? imitating? paying homage to? seducing?⁴² Why such high-spirited readings of Luce Irigaray's *body* of work? Mightn't it be that she's onto something, and that that something is threatening, dangerous, potentially hurtful to patriarchy, to western culture, to the world as we know it? Even that that "something" is a menace to our meaning-making systems, to the "ground" of our being/beneath our feet, to our bodies themselves? Luce Irigaray poeticizes the body that many think she essentializes; she elaborately *mystifies* the body. "The impetus for Irigaray's 'referential illusion' (a form of faith?) is her anxiety that we cannot, with certainty,

⁴⁰ Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction*, 56.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 102.

⁴² See Lynne Huffer, "Luce *et veritas*: Toward an Ethics of Performance," in *Yale French Studies* 87 (1995).

anymore assume access to the referent – and some form of *access*, not just failure, is what she desires.”⁴³

Of course, no narrative, and no commentary on narrative, are enough to produce a change in discourse. If anything they risk repressing sexual and affective freedom by moralizing – unless, that is, they can manage to create a style, unless they go beyond the utterance into the creation of new forms. Luce Irigaray appears to live – or, at least, write – by two procedures as important for setting up different norms for life: the analysis of the formal structures of discourse on the one hand, and the creation of a new style on the other. Thus in her writing there is no basic narrative; equally, there are no possible commentaries by others, in the sense of any exhaustive decoding of the text. What is said moves through what she calls a “double style”: a style of loving relationships, a style of thought, of exegesis, of writing. The two are consciously or unconsciously linked, with a more immediately corporeal and affective side in one case, a more socially developed side in the other. Every text is esoteric, not because it *hides* a secret but because it *constitutes* the secret: that which has yet to be revealed is never exhaustively revealable. The only response one can make to the question of the meaning of the text is: read, perceive,

⁴³ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *God Between Their Lips: Desire Between Women in Irigaray, Brontë, and Eliot*, 13.

experience. Luce Irigaray wants her readers to ask of her text, *Who are you?*, as long as one isn't requesting a kind of identity card or an autobiographical anecdote. The answer, then, from the text, would be: *how about you?* Can we find common ground? Talk? Love? Create something together? What is there around us and between us that allows this?⁴⁴

About Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler asks "How can one read a text for what does *not* appear within its own terms, but which nevertheless constitutes the illegible conditions of its own legibility? Indeed how can one read a text for the movement of that disappearing by which the textual 'inside' and 'outside' are constituted?"⁴⁵

⁴⁴ See Luce Irigaray, "Les Trois Genres," in *Sexes et parentés*, 192, my translation.

⁴⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 37.

Luce Irigaray Reading

...interpretation, or merely listening, comes to mean an act which gives the analyst mastery over the analysand, an instrument in the hands of a master and *his* truth.

-Luce Irigaray⁴⁶

Watch Luce Irigaray reading. Her technique, her approach, is very both/and. Her reading replicates what she says about woman: "*she is neither one nor two.*"⁴⁷ Her reading, always, is "both at once."⁴⁸ Her reading *itself* enacts both her experience and her theory.

This is reading of contingency, reading *as* contingency. Crosswise. Crablike. It is reading which *explicitly* privileges metonymy over metaphor, continuity over similarity. And following Luce Irigaray's lesson,⁴⁹ it is possible to read her descriptions of "the feminine" metonymically as keys to her hermeneutic framework. Ownership and property – acquisition, appropriation – are quite foreign to this reading; nearness is at its core, "nearness so pronounced that it makes all

⁴⁶ Luce Irigaray, "The Poverty of Psychoanalysis," *Irigaray Reader*, 84.

⁴⁷ Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which Is Not One," in *This Sex*, 26.

⁴⁸ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 58.

⁴⁹ Her claiming the apparently biologic "two lips," always, as a metaphor for metonymy. See Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 66.

discrimination of identity, and thus all forms of property, impossible.”⁵⁰

This reading method, this writing, labeled by others “*l’écriture féminine*,” “enters into a ceaseless exchange of [itself] with the other without any possibility of identifying either. [It] puts into question all prevailing economies.”⁵¹

Watch Luce Irigaray reading. Responsive to the rhetorical polyvalence of her “subjects,” such as Nietzsche, her narrative voice takes up positions not so much of opposition and antagonism towards the texts as of continuity and comradeship-at-arms. Luce Irigaray openly confesses her relation to her subjects, her admiration, her love, not just for their *subjects* but for their *style*, their prose, and her emphasis on language – theirs, hers – indicates the value she places on the constitutive power of language. “I had the feeling that in Nietzsche, there was a new kind of philosophical language because of the always very dense work of the writing, that was often connected to the critical language. That is to say, through language, through the deconstruction of language, another one could be invented. In a way, Nietzsche made me take off and go soaring. I had the feeling that I was in the middle of poetry, which made me

⁵⁰ Luce Irigaray, “This Sex Which Is Not One,” in *This Sex*, 31.

⁵¹ Ibid.

perfectly happy.”⁵² Like Nietzsche’s, like Freud’s, like Lacan’s, Luce Irigaray’s writing is a practice itself, not “hiding” some truth to be revealed, but the “truth” itself. It constitutes an act which it intends to mean. There is no need to add a gloss that knows what it expresses with knowing it, nor to wonder *what* it is the metaphor of.

In relation to the tradition of academic philosophical discourse, even when it (*rarely*) refers to her, Luce Irigaray represents the outer frontier. Of course a whole line of western philosophy may be found in her work. Plato, Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Heidegger, Freud, Lacan, Derrida, all this goes through Luce Irigaray. And yet, in relation to philosophy, Luce Irigaray has all the roughness, the rusticity, of the outsider, of the peasant from the country that allows her, with a shrug of the shoulder and without it seeming in any way ridiculous, to say with a strength that one cannot ignore: “oh, please, get over yourself – come on! all that is rubbish...” And so this project, this approach, this attempt, this *essai*, this *pièce à thèse*, is, throughout not a trope of false modesty, but rather an indication of my awareness that any description, especially if it is brief, will oversimplify a highly complex body of work whose purpose is partly

⁵² Luce Irigaray, *Le corps-à-corps*, 45, my translation.

to throw into question the abstract intellectualized terminology required by such straightforward monologic description.

Among the axes along which Luce Irigaray writes, an axial and axiomatic question for her, is the relation between writing as a space of subjective creation – *pathos* – and thought as a moment of elaboration and critical self-reflection – *logos*. This is one of the sites where she discerns irreducible and irreversible difference not only of Woman from *man*, but also of real-life women from the reified image of Woman-as-Other. As our present culture configures sexual difference, in the current scene of representation, women's otherness remains, precisely, unrepresentable.⁵³ Within this arena, the two poles of any opposition exist in an asymmetrical relationship. "What would be inverted in sexual difference? Where the feminine is experienced as space, but often with connotations of the abyss and night, while the masculine is experienced as time."⁵⁴

Luce Irigaray's overarching aim is to recombine that which patriarchal power separates. She calls for the melt-down of the male symbolic in order to provide for the radical reenfleshing of both women *and* men. She is explicit on the point that the production of new subjects of desire, new subjectivities, requires a massive social reorganization and

⁵³ See my extended discussion of this in later sections such as "An Ethics of Theological Difference."

⁵⁴ Luce Irigaray, "Sexual Difference," in *Ethics*, 7.

transformation of the material conditions of life. "This is no Marxist hangover, just radical materialism in the poststructuralist mode."⁵⁵

Luce Irigaray takes as her critical object of investigation neither "Woman" nor women. Instead, she examines key examples of phallogentric knowledges – psychoanalysis and the history of idealist philosophy. Yet she does not simply analyze these objects neutrally or indifferently. Her readings of philosophical texts demonstrate not simply male 'bias' or 'domination' at the level of theory, for such terms imply the possibility of a corrected, 'purified,' unbiased knowledge, but rather they *act out* the deeper implications of phallogentrism(s), their representations of women and femininity in terms that are chosen by and affirm masculinity. Phallogentrism, however, is not limited to men's representations of women but must also include the elision of any *maleness* or masculinity in the perspectives and enunciative positions constitutive of knowledges, an isomorphism of theory with male (socio-historical) bodies.

Luce Irigaray spells out how the supposedly neutral, sexually *indifferent* or universal status of knowledges or truths hides the specifically masculine interests that produce them. If men have in part

⁵⁵ Rosi Braidotti, "Feminism by Any Other Name," in *More Gender Trouble: Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, *differences* 6 (Summer-Fall 1994), 54.

rationalized their domination of the production of knowledges by claiming their interests are universal or sexually neutral, this is only because they rely upon a culturally inscribed correlation of men with the category of mind and of women with the category of body. Men are able to dominate knowledge paradigms because women take on the function of representing the *body, the irrational, the natural*, or other epistemologically devalued binary terms. By positioning women as *the body, men* can project themselves and their products as *disembodied, pure, and uncontaminated*. Luce Irigaray's project consists in part in returning the male body to its products.

This implies that knowledges must be seen as *perspectival, partial, limited, and contestable* products, the results of historically specific political, sexual, and epistemological imperatives. Prevailing knowledges, in being recognized as male and as representing men's perspectives, are not thereby rendered redundant or useless (though this may be the effect on some), but are instead limited to a narrower, more constricted position – as partial views, commensurable or incommensurable with other perspectives and possible perspectives. This challenges the dominant positions accorded to masculine or phallogentric knowledges, and enables

women to learn from them and from their various crises in developing different positions.

Luce Irigaray's work thus remains critical of such traditional values as "truth" and "non-truth" (where these are conceived as correspondence between propositions and reality), Aristotelian logic (the logic of the syllogism), and accounts of reason based on them. This does not mean her work could be described as irrational, illogical, or false: on the contrary, her work is quite logical, rational, and true in terms of quite different criteria, perspectives, and values than those now (patriarchally, phallogratically) dominant. She both combats and constructs, while strategically questioning phallogentric knowledges, without trying to replace them with more inclusive or more neutral truths. Instead, she attempts to reveal a *politics* of truth, logic, and reason. She does not present a more encompassing knowledge, but rather a *less* encompassing knowledge, one committed to the struggles in and around specific texts and debates, not a new eternal truth or a final answer. In other words, her texts are openly acknowledged as historical and contextual, of strategic value in particular times and places, but not necessarily useful or valid in all contexts. Knowledges, however, do not simply *reflect* the social and

historical contexts out of which they were developed; rather, they help actively to (re-)inscribe or (re-)engender the meaning of the social.

She works strategically from a borderline or marginal position that is both within and beyond the bounds of existing theory. Only from such a tenuous and ambiguous position, she argues, can she both challenge patriarchal texts at their most fundamental levels and, at the same time, prevent the co-option and integration that patriarchal systems use to transform serious threats to their operations. She aims to subvert the ready-made boundaries between knowledges, not by ignoring them or pretending they do not operate but by strategically harnessing precisely the most tension-ridden and contrary disciplines so that the presuppositions of each are challenged.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ For instance, it is not Luce Irigaray who erects the phallus as a single transcendental signifier, but Lacan.

Reading Against the Feminist Mirror: Through the Looking Glass

...because on this side of the screen of their
projections, on this *plane* of their
representations, I can't live.

-Luce Irigaray⁵⁷

About the term *feminism*, Luce Irigaray responds that it is "the word by which the social system designated the struggle of women." She is "completely willing to abandon this word," because it is formed on the same model as the other great words of oppressive culture.⁵⁸ While she does maintain that in some situations it may be necessary to reclaim "feminism" from the dominant culture, Luce Irigaray prefers to discuss the struggles of women or even women's liberation movements. "She does not use "feminism" in her texts."⁵⁹ Might the epigraph I have chosen for this section, from one of Luce Irigaray's most playful and most critically resistant texts, "The Looking Glass, from the Other Side," refer, then, not only to the masculine gaze as it relegates the feminine to its atrophied, distorted mirror other, but also to various feminist gazes which, similarly, contort Luce Irigaray's words to work, or not, according

⁵⁷ Luce Irigaray, "The Looking Glass, from the Other Side," in *This Sex*, 17.

⁵⁸ Luce Irigaray, "Questions," in *This Sex*, 166.

⁵⁹ Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind*, 164.

to their needs and desires? Or should I perhaps better term the epigraph an epigram, for its witty, if desperate, playfulness? or an epitaph, for the ways in which it signals the insistent interment of Luce Irigaray's writing in the crypts of patriarchal epistemologies, including feminism?

Too few readers of feminist theory take up the important question of location and of cultural specificity. Cross-cultural reading requires moments of patience, generosity, silence while the other speaks; it calls the readers into a stance of standing, for a moment, in an other's shoes, or sitting in her chair, of sleeping in her bed. Take, for instance, the question of what is called *French feminism*. Flipply, Toril Moi refers to Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous as the "holy Trinity" of French feminist theory. If we read "French feminism" in our American context(s), we *must* face the problems around importation. In France, for instance, differences among these (and other) writers are articulated and nuanced. Further, each of these *three* is an outsider: not one of them was born in France – they're not even *French*! – and "none of them claim any kind of unqualified relation to feminism."⁶⁰ Gayatri Spivak is one reader who takes cultural location into account. As she says, "feminism means something else in France. I really don't have much to do with it because

⁶⁰ Ibid., 163-64.

that's *very situation-specific*." She reads Luce Irigaray "within the general tradition of French experimental writing, foregrounding rhetoric." Spivak acknowledges that Luce Irigaray may seem essentialist when she talks about women, but "*only* if she is read as the pure theoretical prose of truth – whatever that might be" – a bad Anglo-American reading habit. The French, after Kojève, read Hegel and Marx with an eye to rhetoric. Spivak adds, marvelously turning the screw of essentialist interpretation from Luce Irigaray to readers of Luce Irigaray: "we know Derrida has to be read that way. Why do we become essentialist readers when we read someone like Irigaray?"⁶¹ Françoise Meltzer too approaches the cross-cultural reading question with sense and sensitivity. Among the difficulties she observes, "there is in fact no single French (or, I would maintain, any other) "feminism." As soon as "French" gets put next to "American," or "theology" in contradistinction to "literary theory," the reductive binaries, not to mention essentialisms, begin to proliferate."⁶²

I would suggest that the so-called French feminists have too frequently been lumped together by Moi and others, precisely in order to be dismissed. It may be, say, that some American feminists projected the charges of essentialism that were coming from black feminists onto the

⁶¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, 17.

⁶² Françoise Meltzer, "Transfeminisms," in *Transfigurations*, 17.

French feminists. Overlooking their differences, and their theories of difference, some American feminists criticized the French feminists for their essentialism and elitism, the very charges that were being brought against American feminists themselves. In an essentializing move, some American feminists reduced the French feminists to one concept, feminine writing, and then projected all of the charges of excluding women onto their theories. Further, the differences in philosophical traditions and training also contribute to American feminists' persistent misreadings of French feminists. Freire's horizontal violence in action.

This is thinking gender trouble.⁶³ This thing called feminism, particularly as it attempts to construct the stories of its own production, is caught between the desire to act and the resistance to action that threatens to reproduce what poststructuralists, like Luce Irigaray, call the economy of the same. Luce Irigaray deploys rhetorical tools which both show and enable feminists to show that "the difference between entities (prose and poetry, man and woman, literature and theory, guilt and innocence) are based on a repression of differences *within* entities, ways by which an entity differs from itself."⁶⁴

⁶³ To borrow and to contort the phrase of Judith Butler.

⁶⁴ Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference*, x-xi.

“Even Irigaray’s supple machinery of *meaning* has the effect of transfixing, then sublimating, the quicksilver of sex itself.”⁶⁵ For Luce Irigaray, the logic of the west – philosophy, psychoanalysis, theology – is all male self-love, “hom(me)o-sexual.” Luce Irigaray tries to go back through, into, behind, masculine imaginary, to interpret the way in which it has reduced those it constructs as its other to silence, to muteness or mimicry. She maintains that the very construct of an autonomous subject is a masculine cultural prerogative from which women are excluded. She further claims that the subject is always already masculine, that it bespeaks a refusal of dependency required of male acculturation, understood originally as dependency on the mother, and that its “autonomy” is founded on a repression of its early and true helplessness, need, sexual desire for the mother, even identification with the maternal body. The subject thus becomes a fantasy of autogenesis, the refusal of maternal foundations and, in generalized form, a repudiation of the feminine. For Luce Irigaray, then, it would make no sense to refer to a female subject or to women as subjects, for it is precisely the construct of the subject that necessitates relations of hierarchy, exclusion, and domination. “In a word, there can be no subject without an Other.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 26.

⁶⁶ Luce Irigaray, “Any Theory of the Subject Has Already Been Appropriated by the Masculine,” in *Speculum*, 140.

An Ethics of Reading: In the Beginning...

In this anguish, I determined to write
about certain texts by Luce Irigaray.

-Jane Gallop⁶⁷

What would be an *ethical* reading of/relation to Luce Irigaray? This question comes of an acknowledgment of the project at the heart of her work, ethics – already, you see, an ethical reading, a reading of ethics, a reading of *her* reading of/relation to ethics, her deeply, overtly Lévinasian reading, putting ethics first. Titling a book *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. In fact, following Lévinas' deep reading of Heidegger, contra Descartes, Luce Irigaray radically posits a self that is possible only in relation to and recognition of the other. Respect and responsibility, not mutuality and dialogue. How is it possible to “decode” the “material conditions of [this] existence”?⁶⁸

Any ethics must include a quest for origins/beginnings/truths, as construction, as practice. What is my “place”? What draws me “here”? My gender dysphoria. My francophilia. My interest in/experience

⁶⁷ Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body*, 93.

⁶⁸ Luce Irigaray, “Divine Women,” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 57.

with/devotion to Lacanian rereadings of Freud. My swooning for difficulty. My lifelong strong relation to strong women. But this scarcely scratches the surface. What are the origins of *this* work, this interest, of which you see scattered, here, parts of its trajectory, here and there, circumlocutorily, solecistically.

In insisting on the textuality and origins of this thesis not in theory per se but in the production of a practice, in the space between origins and “here,” I take feminism as an enabling inspiration, not as theoretical orthodoxy or as an authorizing new institutionalization. I situate my endeavor in the realm of the question de Certeau has pointed to as the antinomy between what he defines as ethics and what, “for lack of a better word,” he calls dogmatism: “Ethics is articulated through *effective operations*, and it defines a distance between what is and what ought to be. This distance designates a space where we have *something to do*. On the other hand, dogmatism is authorized by a reality it claims to represent and in the name of this reality, it imposes laws.”⁶⁹ In its dogmatic aspect, every theory is legislating. It dictates on the one hand and censors on the other. Practice is not censoring but merely showing *what can be done*, and done otherwise, for instance in reading, or in writing, or in the classroom

⁶⁹ Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies*, 199, my emphasis.

with students who might be eager to acquire tools “of insight” or to communicate with literature as some form of artistic wisdom about life. Practice does not institute its laws but shows us ways (that work or do not work: ways whose measure is not rightness but effectiveness) enabling us, as Adrienne Rich has put it, “not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us”⁷⁰ – enabling us, that is, to intervene in the transmission of canonic culture not just in demystifying its blind spots, its bigotry, and its coercive structures but in illuminating, at the same time, its self-critical perspectives and its own implicit (inadvertent) self-subversive insights.

In another context Luce Irigaray describes an ethics of reading: “No surface holds. No figure, line, or point remains. No ground subsists. But no abyss, either. Depth, for us, is not a chasm. Without a solid crust, there is no precipice. Our depth is the thickness of our body, our all touching itself. Where top and bottom, inside and outside, in front and behind, above and below are not separated, remote, out of touch. Our all intermingled. Without breaks or gaps.”⁷¹

Luce Irigaray is suspicious of Lévinas’ insistence on the lack of fulfillment in the ethical relationship. She is uncannily optimistic about

⁷⁰ Adrienne Rich, *When We Dead Awaken*, 35.

⁷¹ Luce Irigaray, “When Our Lips Speak Together,” in *This Sex*, 213.

communion through a love that as a love *becomes divine*. Her interrogation of Lévinas is traceable to a Nietzschean suspicion of the unhappiness potentially generated by an eschatology without hope for the fulfillment of the individual. From Lévinas' perspective, we must constantly remind ourselves of our inevitable failure to fulfill our responsibility. We must constantly seek to do more for the Other. We can never do enough. We do not have much fun in "the ethical relation." Luce Irigaray cautions that Lévinas' emphasis on the inevitable lack of fulfillment of the individual allows the source of dissatisfaction of women to be ignored. No woman finds enjoyment in her *reduction* to either the good wife or the bad mistress. Concentration on the failure to the stranger diverts attention from the failure that is closer to home. For Luce Irigaray, nonsatisfaction may well not be ethical or "sublime": it may be explicitly "sexist."⁷²

Luce Irigaray's work is best understood not as another instance of crude essentialism or as a politically mistaken interest in biology, but rather as a strategy, for denaturalizing the body by redeploying morphological language. "The most intimate perception of the flesh escapes every sacrificial substitution.... This memory of the flesh as the place of approach is ethical fidelity to incarnation. To destroy it risks

⁷² For a similar discussion, see Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit*, 88.

suppressing alterity, both God's and the Other's."⁷³ This is not just philosophical or literary talk, but Christian talk, of incarnation. Luce Irigaray would restore the (im)possible garden, threshold moment of being human, where woman's sin does not make man's difficult access to knowledge possible. "Not perceptible as profanation. The threshold of the garden, a welcoming cosmic home, remaining open. No guard other than love itself. Innocent of the knowledge of the display and the fall."⁷⁴ *G*d*,⁷⁵ here, is the condition of the subject's certitude, of the finite subject's identity as a law-abiding being. "God is the condition, for Irigaray, of having a *genre*."⁷⁶ The ethical issues, the essence, of her project (and mine, her reader) are also theological.

All theory intersects with "real life," affects practice, at the double risk of consolidating the very values that it attempts to displace, on the one hand, and of setting up new values within the same hierarchical binary structures of the old values, on the other hand. Every text must be called to account for the ways in which it is complicit with the values that

⁷³ Luce Irigaray, "The Fecundity of the Caress," in *Ethics*, 256.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁷⁵ I use this orthography to mark the inadequacy of any language to speak about *g*d* and visibly to destabilize our way(s) of thinking and speaking about *g*d*. See Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak*, 32. Too, I considered using the term "God" under erasure, as Luce Irigaray does in "La Mystérieuse," in *Speculum*. In "Divine Women," Luce Irigaray comments that "the capital letter designates the horizon of the accomplishment of a genre, and not a transcendent entity which is not subject to becoming" (*Sexes et parentés*, 75, my translation).

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 159.

it attempts to overturn. Luce Irigaray is trying to open philosophical discourse onto its other, to open the possibility of imagining doing philosophy otherwise. This is philosophy whose ethics is based on a way of valuing that is not hostile to everything different from itself, but is, rather, tolerant of, solicitous of, difference.⁷⁷

“When you kiss [read, “read”] me, the world grows so large that the horizon itself disappears. Are we unsatisfied? Yes, if that means we are never finished. If our pleasure consists in moving, being moved, endlessly. Always in motion: openness is never spent nor sated.”⁷⁸

⁷⁷ After Nietzsche...

⁷⁸ Luce Irigaray, “When Our Lips Speak Together,” in *This Sex*, 210.

Putting Feuerbach in His Place

Is a god what we need, then? A god who can upset the limits of the possible, melt the ancient glaciers, a god who can make a future for us. A god carried on the breath of the *cosmos*, the song of the poets, the respiration of lovers.

-Luce Irigaray⁷⁹

The Trinity was the highest mystery and the focal point of absolute philosophy and religion. But as was historically and philosophically shown with regard to the essence of Christianity, the secret of the Trinity is the secret of communal and social life; it is the secret of the necessity of the "thou" for an "I"; it is the truth that no being – be it a man, God, mind, or ego – is for itself alone a true, perfect, and absolute being, that truth and perfection are only the connection and unity of beings equal in their essence. The highest and last principle of philosophy is, therefore, the unity of man with man. All essential relations – the principles of various sciences – are only different kinds and ways of this unity.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Luce Irigaray, "An Ethics of Sexual Difference," in *Ethics*, 128.

⁸⁰ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, #63, 72.

"For both Feuerbach and Lévinas, God is a form of alterity affirming the human."⁸¹ Not so for Luce Irigaray, in her reading of Feuerbach and Lévinas. The Feuerbachian g*d offers the image and ideal of *man*. Luce Irigaray's project is about redefining, revivifying, what religion is. This "is," this having a religious attitude, includes, for her, having a goal or purpose, projecting into an unknown future, seeing a horizon. G*d is the end of an infinite becoming. Thus it is not adequate simply to rely on received formulas of worship which affirm a male-defined g*d. "The task for women is not to include themselves within a pre-existing image of God but to find a God for themselves."⁸² Luce Irigaray's notion of g*d(s) and the divine is part of her general strategy of deconstructive textual reading of philosophical (not simply theological) texts in an attempt to replace a metaphysical, masculinist onto-theology, in which *man* defines, and is not in turn defined by, g*d, with the idea of sexual and cultural specificity.

From Feuerbach, Luce Irigaray derives both the notion of g*d as a limit and perfection point of *human* self-completion, and the necessity of including *both* sexes within any notion of the divine. Feuerbach's holy

⁸¹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 152.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 153.

trinity of Father-Son-Holy Ghost can be read, although he himself precludes this, as a metaphor of the human family, a structure which is necessarily and essentially dependent on the position and contributions of the mother, as much, if not more than the father.

Religion is the relation of man to his own nature – therein lies its truth and its power or moral amelioration – but to his nature not recognized as his own, but regarded as another nature, separate, nay, contradistinguished from his own: herein lies its untruth, its limitation, its contradiction to reason and morality; herein lies the noxious source of religious fanaticism, the chief metaphysical principle of human sacrifices, in a word, the *prima materia* of all the atrocities, all the horrible scenes, in the tragedy of religious history.”⁸³

⁸³ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, 197. Feuerbach puts forth a radical conceptualization of religious alienation. This alienation, whose formal structure is that of external reflection, does *not* consist simply in the fact that *man* - creative being, externalizing his potentials in the world of objects - deifies objectivity, conceiving the objective natural and social forces out of his control as manifestations of some supernatural Being. Rather, for Feuerbach, alienation means something more: that *man* presupposes, perceives *himself*, his own creative power, in the form of an external substantial Entity; it means that he projects, transposes his innermost essence, into an alien Being – g*d. G*d is thus *man* himself, the essence of *man*, the creative movement of mediation, the transforming power of negativity, but perceived in the form of externality, as belonging to some strange Entity existing in itself, independently of *man*. And so there is difference -- a fissure separating the essence from appearance – only insofar as the essence is itself split in this way - only, that is, insofar as the essence presupposes itself as something alien, as its own Other. If the essence is not in itself split; if, in the movement of extreme alienation, it does not perceive itself as an alien Entity, then the very duality essence/appearance cannot establish itself. This self-fissure of the essence

means that the essence is *subject* and not only *substance*. The passage from external to determinate reflection consist simply in the fact that *man* has to recognize in g*d, in this external, superior, alien Entity, the inverse reflection of his own essence - that is, its own essence in the form of otherness, the reflexive determination of its own essence – and thus to affirm himself as absolute subject.

This model, in which the subject overcomes alienation by recognizing, in the alienated substantial Entity, the inverse image of his own essential potential, implies a notion of religion that corresponds to the Enlightenment's portrait of the Jewish religion (almighty g*d as an inverse image of *man's* powerlessness, and so on); what escapes such an understanding is the logic behind the fundamental motif of Christianity: g*d's incarnation. The Feuerbachian gesture of recognizing that g*d as an alien essence is nothing but the alienated image of *man's* creative potential does not take into account the necessity for this reflexive relationship between g*d and *man* to reflect itself *into* g*d *itself*; in other words, it does not suffice to ascertain that *man* is the truth of g*d, that the subject is the truth of the alienated substantial Entity. It is not enough for the subject to recognize/reflect itself in this Entity as in inverse image; the crucial point is that this substantial Entity must itself split and 'engender' the subject (that is, g*d must become *enfleshed*).

As for the dialectics of positing and presupposing, this necessity means that it is not enough to affirm that the subject posits its own presuppositions. This positing of presuppositions is already contained in the logic of positing reflection; what defines determinate reflection is, rather, that the subject must *presuppose himself as positing*. More precisely: the subject effectively posits his presuppositions by presupposing, by reflecting himself in them as positing. Take two obvious examples, the Monarch and Christ. In the immediacy of their lives, subjects as citizens are, of course, opposed to the substantial State which determines the concrete network of their social relations. How do they overcome this alienated character, this irreducible otherness of the State as the substantial presupposition of the subjects' activity – positing?

The classical Marxist answer would be that the State as an alienated force must wither away, that its otherness must be dissolved in the transparency of non-alienated social relations. The Hegelian answer is, on the contrary, that in the last resort, subjects can recognize the State as their own work only by reflecting free subjectivity into the very State at the point of the Monarch; that is, by presupposing in the State itself - as its quilting point, as a point which confers its effectivity - the point of free subjectivity, the point of the Monarch's empty-formal gesture: "This is my will...."

This dialectic makes neatly clear the necessity behind the double meaning of the word *subject*: 1) a person subject to political rule; 2) a free agent, instigator of its activity. Subjects can realize themselves as free agents only by means of redoubling themselves, only insofar as they project, transpose, the pure form of their freedom into the very heart of the substance opposed to them, into the person of the subject-Monarch as "head of the State." In other words, subjects are subjects only insofar as they presuppose that the social substance opposed to them in the form of the State is already in itself a subject (Monarch) to whom they are subjected.

To supplement: the empty gesture, the act of formal conversion by means of which substance becomes subject, is not simply dispersed among the multitude of subjects and as such proper to each of them in the same manner; it is always centered at some point of conception, in the One, the individual who takes upon *himself* the idiotic mandate of performing the empty gesture of subjectivation - of supplementing the given, substantial content by the form of "This is my will." This is homologous with Christ: the subjects overcome the Otherness, the strangeness, of the Jewish g*d not by immediately proclaiming that g*d their own creature but by presupposing in g*d itself the point of incarnation, the point at which g*d becomes *man*. This is the significance of Christ's arrival, of his "It is fulfilled!": for freedom to take place (as our positing), *it must already have taken place* in g*d as *man's*

Does Luce Irigaray's use of Feuerbach allow her to generate a discourse on g*d that differs importantly from the phallocentrism she critiques? Certainly she plays her two conceptions of g*d against each other, contrasting the g*d of *man* who is stable, immutable, and singular with the g*d of woman who is fluid, infinitely open, and capable of holding the endless variety of goals that woman might conceive for herself. But these two g*ds nonetheless bear a remarkable resemblance to each other. Both are, according to her reading of Feuerbach, the product of a projected desire; they are each the term of gender's becoming and in this regard function to secure the infinite horizon of accomplishment which the finite human will needs to survive and grow. And, though Luce Irigaray points out that the specific contours of each gender's horizon are different, the g*d who is this horizon in each case serves the human will by taking on, as mirror, the attributes of the concrete human

incarnation. Without it, subjects would remain forever bound to the alien substance, caught in the web of their presuppositions. (Too, this is a chilling reminder of the importance of Lévinas' perspective, for instance, as absolutely necessary *ethical* corrective to Feuerbach's Enlightenment-Christian-based anti-Semitism.)

The necessity of this redoubling explains why the strongest instigation to free activity was procured by Protestantism - by religion putting so much emphasis on predestination, on the notion that everything is already decided in advance. Too, this allows clearer formulation to the passage from external to determinate reflection: the condition of our subjective freedom, of our positing, is that it must be reflected in advance into the substance itself, as its own reflexive determination. For that reason, Greek, Jewish, and Christian religions form a triad of reflection: in Greek religion, divinity is posited in the multitude of beautiful appearance (which is why, for Hegel, Greek religion was religion of the work of art); in Jewish religion, the subject perceives its own essence in the form of a transcendent, external, unattainable power; in Christianity, human freedom is conceived as a reflexive determination of this strange substance, g*d, itself.

subject creating the Divine. It thus appears that the g*d of Man and the g*d of woman, although generated from different morphological economies, share origins: the productivity of a consciousness that creates g*d in his or her own image.

Beyond the Mirror: Wounded, Abandoned, Leftover

I have been trying for years to understand the relations I have lived – relations between spirituality and desire, between sex and sorrow, between gendered lack and escape through wounds.

-Kathryn Bond Stockton⁸⁴

Women and other culturally disenfranchised people are abandoned outside symbolic order; they lack mediation in the symbolic for the operations of sublimation. In relation to hegemonic kyriarchal culture, they are without hope, help, or refuge. They exist in a state of *déréliction*, abandoned by g*d. *“What is in excess with respect to form – for example, the feminine sex – is necessarily rejected as beneath or beyond the system currently*

⁸⁴ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *God Between Their Lips*, xv.

in force."⁸⁵ Woman does not exist in the eyes of discursivity, except in silent, eloquent trace, whisper: g*d.

What is Luce Irigaray doing in her work? She wants "not to create a theory of woman,"⁸⁶ but to open a world of difference that would be safe for the feminine – for women and all people. That difference – masculine/feminine – has always operated from the inside of systems that are representative, self-representative, of the masculine subject. These systems have produced many other differences that appear articulated to compensate for an operative sexual indifference. But "one sex and its lack, its atrophy, its negative, still does not add up to two."⁸⁷ She says over and over: the feminine has *never* been defined – *cannot be defined* – except as the inverse, the underside, of the masculine. Luce Irigaray urges that for woman it is not a matter of cozying up within this lack, this negative, even by denouncing it, nor of reversing the economy of sameness by turning the feminine into the standard for sexual difference, but rather it is a matter of trying to *practice* that difference. Hence her questions, and mine: what other modes of reading or writing, of interpretation and affirmation, might we establish in a culture of sexual

⁸⁵ Luce Irigaray, "The 'Mechanics' of Fluids," in *This Sex*, 110.

⁸⁶ Luce Irigaray, "Questions," in *This Sex*, 159.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

difference? How do we avoid reducing difference, any difference, all difference, “once again to a process of *hierarchization*? Of subordinating the other to the same?”⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Ibid.

II. The Shape of Divinity

Respect for God is possible as long as no one realizes that he is a mask concealing the fact that men have taken sole possession of the divine, of identity, and of kinship.

-Luce Irigaray⁸⁹

Reading Theology?

[My enterprise is not to answer questions but] to pursue their questioning, to continue to interrogate.

-Luce Irigaray⁹⁰

I take Luce Irigaray's interest in theology as central to her project. Given her reading methods, that her remarks on theology are scattered and enigmatic does not imply that she has only a casual interest in

⁸⁹ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, v.

⁹⁰ Luce Irigaray, "Some Questions," in *This Sex*, 119.

theological issues. She returns to the question of g*d “persistently and rigorously,”⁹¹ and she posits significant linkages among:

- the question of ethics, based on her reading of Lévinas’ notion of ethics as an encounter with alterity;
- her notion of g*d and the divine, derived from her readings of Feuerbach, Marx, Lévinas, and Schüssler Fiorenza, among others;
- her conceptualization of sexual exchange, based on irreducibly different sexes as partners.
- her understanding of the elements or the elemental, grounded in her reading of Empedoclean ontology and Merleau-Ponty;

Luce Irigaray understands the all-pervasiveness of religious influences in the modern west and our complicity, our collusion, willy-nilly, in those systems. “Many of us are under the impression that all we have to do is not enter a church, refuse to practice the sacraments, and never read the sacred texts in order to be free from the influence of religion on our lives.”⁹² But we delude ourselves; we are all flushed with the christian and other traditions in the art, philosophy, and myths we live by, exchange, and perpetuate, often without our realizing. And we do

⁹¹ Serene Jones, “This God Which Is Not One,” in *Another Look, Another Woman: Retranslations of French Feminism*, 121.

⁹² Luce Irigaray, “Religious and Civil Myths,” in *je, tu, nous*, 23.

ourselves a disservice by leaving “religion” to the side. “The passage from one era to the next cannot be made simply by negating what already exists.”⁹³

Luce Irigaray is a theological revolutionary, aiming to subvert the monologic discourses of law and authority and truth as one and unified, and to liberate the heterogeneity of desire. From her perspective, from her theological articulation, g*d fills the empty place that male perceives in female, and thus *man* keeps his homological, homosexual system intact by incorporating the mother/female as mirror or shadow, in effect refusing to share the membrane or to acknowledge difference. Her interest in “jamming the theoretical machinery itself”⁹⁴ is to make clear those supremacist forces which are a “covering up of the forcefulness, of force itself, of desire, of pleasure, under the lawmaking power of discourse.”⁹⁵ Against this male-father-g*d, who mythologically killed the Mother to take power, Luce Irigaray wonders “if there is not some fluidity, some flood, which could overturn the present social order? For if we make the foundation of the culture move, *everything will move*.”⁹⁶ Which is precisely,

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Luce Irigaray, “The Power of Discourse,” in *This Sex*, 79.

⁹⁵ Luce Irigaray, “Questions,” in *This Sex*, 163.

⁹⁶ Luce Irigaray, “Les femmes-mères,” in *Le corps-à-corps*, 81, my translation.

of course, why the resistance to revolution in the name of feminism is so strong.

Luce Irigaray fleshes out her call for a faith revolt in her reading of Nietzsche, arguably the most and the least theological of philosophers. "G*d itself is divided between the most immutably fixed and the most lightly airy, between the least and the most porous. Inside the ark, God is to be found in the place that is left empty between. In the between that has yet to occur. In the still possible between."⁹⁷ She poses this not-yet g*d of difference and freedom: "perhaps a certain kind of divine has never taken place, even though it has been heralded. One that is coming. Not eternally deferring its coming, but expecting the expectation of the other before it presents itself, offers itself. Penetrates the other lovingly. Dwells in the other, without taking over. And receives, in return."⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover*, 175.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 182.

It is a damaging and self-defeating assumption that theory is necessarily the elite language of the socially and culturally privileged.

-Homi Bhabha⁹⁹

The issue, then, for Luce Irigaray, is not one of elaborating a *new* theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of “jamming the theoretical machinery itself,” of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal. This presupposes that women do not aspire simply to be men’s equals in knowledge, that they do not claim to be rivaling men in constructing a logic of the feminine that would still take the onto-theological as its model, but rather that they want to wrest the question and prerogative of “theory” away from the economy of the *logos*.

Luce Irigaray, “feminist theologian of lack,”¹⁰⁰ who has “alluded frequently – if unobtrusively – to religious or spiritual themes for years,”¹⁰¹ seems in some ways to “get down to it” in her 1984 lecture “Divine Women.” There she qualifies the usually philosophic enterprise

⁹⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 19.

¹⁰⁰ Kathryn Bond Stockton’s term; see her *God Between Their Lips*, throughout.

¹⁰¹ Phillipa Berry, introduction, in *Shadow of Spirit*, 4.

of genealogy, a term she uses through Nietzsche and Foucault, as “our generic incarnation,” our incarnation in the female gender, with enormous, if not immediately obvious, political relevance. She begins by reiterating that a vertical dimension is necessary for female freedom, and that this dimension is made up of the genealogical relation and at the same time of woman’s relation to the divine.¹⁰² Later, in “The Universal as Mediation,” Luce Irigaray introduces a distinction between these two reference points, the divine and the genealogical, a distinction between g*d and ancestors. Ancestors, she says, reveal a genealogy, a history, not an infinite: the possibility of a feminine divine, a theology for women, is poised in tension between the horizon of the divine and memory/history.

In “Divine Women,” addressed in fact to an audience of women only, taking Feuerbach as her starting point, Luce Irigaray asserts that in order to attain freedom and grow in it, women must imagine a g*d, “that we should incarnate a God within us and in our sex, daughter-woman-mother.”¹⁰³ Rebelling against oppression is not enough to free us all from the strictures of patriarchy; we must have an end (telos, goal, or purpose) and one or more laws. The scope, categories, and utopias of religious

¹⁰² See my discussion, yet to come, in “An Ethics of theological difference” and following.

¹⁰³ Luce Irigaray, “Divine Women,” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 71.

thinking “all have been male for centuries and remain so.”¹⁰⁴ “Women need a language, images, and representations which suit them – on a cultural level, even on a religious level, god being the philosophical subject’s great accomplice.”¹⁰⁵

Many of her critics ask why Luce Irigaray plants herself so maddeningly, densely, dizzyingly half in, half out of the collaborator’s camp, the terrain of philosophy? Wouldn’t ridding herself of philosophy altogether demonstrate the sort of lack of deference for the shibboleths of western culture she seems to advocate? She argues from both sides: you will never escape by staying within philosophy, by refining it as much as you can, by circumventing it with your own discourse and language. No. It is by opposing it with a sort of astonished, joyful stupidity, a sort of uncomprehending burst of laughter, which, in the end, understands, or, in any case, shatters. Yes. It is only by inhabiting the system, with an insider’s understanding, that any alternative can be dreamt or drawn.

At first Luce Irigaray looked to her clinical practice, to the cries of madness, to escape from philosophy. She then realized that she was escaping from philosophy, and yet not, all along, that Nietzsche, Freud, Lacan, Bataille, Blanchot, Klossowski...all were ways of escaping from

¹⁰⁴ Luce Irigaray, “Women, the Sacred, Money, in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 76.

¹⁰⁵ Luce Irigaray, “The Question of the Other,” in *Another Look, Another Woman: Retranslations of French Feminism*, 13.

and remaining within. In Bataille's violence, in Blanchot's insidious, disturbing sweetness, in Klossowski's spirals, there was something that, while setting out from philosophy, brought it into play and into question, emerged from it, then went back into it: something like Klossowski's theory of breathing is bound up with, knotted within, thread upon thread, the whole of western philosophy. And then by the presentation, the formulation, the way in which it functions, it completely emerges from it. Luce Irigaray discovered that such exits and entrances through the very wall of philosophy made permeable – and thus, in the end, derisory – the frontier between the philosophical and the non-philosophical, and then *enacted* that permeability in her practice and her writing.

Theology and theory come together as striptease, as a mutual unmasking. "Belief is safe only if that in which or in whom the assembly communes or communicates is subject to concealment."¹⁰⁶ Theory threatens theology; theology decimates theory. And yet they are mutually implicated. Lacan writes, "here is the God of the philosophers, displaced from his latency **even in theory**. *Theoria*, might that not be the place in the world for the theo-logy?"¹⁰⁷ The subject-supposed-to-know is "God Himself," a reflection in which the knowledge of consciousness

¹⁰⁶ Luce Irigaray, "Belief Itself," in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 27.

¹⁰⁷ Jacques Lacan, "La Méprise du sujet supposé savoir," in *Scilicet*, no. 1 (1968), 39.

contemplates itself – ghost, memory, dream of power, of potency, trance induced by the mirror's narcissistic, self-deluding trick. The subject-supposed-to-know, that which is invested with power and knowledge and g*dliness, exists only in delusions and fantasies. Lacan subverts this subject with a radical theory of non-transparency, of universal, endless mis-understanding. How can one construct a theory of *mistake* essential to the very nature of theory? If misprision is universal, how can one escape error oneself? To what can one appeal within a theory of radical misunderstanding?

Speaking for the Other: Reading Positions

Positionality: I put Luce Irigaray in same relation to me that she puts the philosophers in relation to her. A relation of homage, but also of *assujettissement*, taking as worthy subject and also making subject, subjectifying. I pause. Derrida speaks in the name of/for/as a feminine subject in a mode of male appropriation of women's right to speak. Just at that moment in history when speaking as a woman finally has some political and theoretical credibility, Derrida, along with Deleuze and

others, wants to occupy the very speaking position that women have finally produced for themselves. Luce Irigaray articulates this critique very clearly:

“What I am able to say without any hesitation is that when male theoreticians today employ women’s discourse instead of using male discourse, that seems to me a very phallocratic gesture. It means: ‘We will become and we will speak a feminine discourse in order to remain the master of the discourse.’ What I would want from men is that, finally, they would speak a masculine discourse and affirm that they are doing so.”¹⁰⁸

While this plea is understandable, it rests on two facile, problematic assumptions:

1. That one can, through a conscious avowal, acknowledge what one’s position is. This is a basic assumption in “identity politics,” which commonly functions in a publicly confessional mode, and in anti-racist calls for an authentic native voice, a voice that can speak only “as it is.” Can one *admit* what one’s position is? Is a position definitively

¹⁰⁸ Luce Irigaray, cited in Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, 132.

present, not only to a subject's self-representation, but for all others to avow and accept? Does any subject or position have the stability to definitively state what-it-is? Texts, speaking positions, identities cannot anchor themselves so readily in a definite moment of articulation where their consciousness exactly coincides with their existence.

2. The assumption exists that there is a clear-cut distinction between talking as a man and talking as a woman. We may be able to presume (possibly without a clear-cut justification) a ready distinction between men and women; but even if we do, it is not clear how anyone can constrain men and women to speak only in their own voice or as their sex. What would that be, anyway? "Hey, son, sit up straight and *talk like a man*." This is to ignore or misunderstand that language itself is the endless possibility of speaking *otherwise*.

Indeed, *I* am spoken otherwise by my spirit guides, those interparadigmatic thinkers like Nietzsche, Freud, Lacan, Derrida, and Luce Irigaray, who in my understanding explore the nature of imitative desire, multi-voiced intersubjectivities, splittings and reflections of the self and other, confused in-mixings of subjects, objects, and the dangerous "abject" that not only pollutes but also subverts our attempts at mastery,

control, and knowledge. This is not to reduce the profound differences among their discourses. In fact, reading them against each other brings to light that in creating the differences that make up their separately conceived “totalizing systems” – for they each aspire to explain what is *really* going on, in the experiencing subject and in the social order that constructs our identities within it – they criticize each other’s failure to peer directly into the blind spot which, ancient grail-like, we still seek. And this despite each discourse’s insistence on the impossibility of such “true” (g*d’s-eye) sight, the abject impossibility of attaining the position of “the subject supposed to know,” the place where one could point to a constant and irrefutable meaning seen and accepted by one and all, which would not be always already polluted by the value-judgments which have constructed our world of experiencing, as if they were only facts of life out there for all to discover. The differences among them are the arbitrary differences (in the Saussurean sense: they define a matrix, a spatial relationship of interrelationships) within whose virtual mental geography we readers can wander, trying on and inhabiting the recognitions of ideas who feel their time has come. And if we won’t *inhabit* them, cohabit with them, they will either possess or *inhibit* us.

The Tale of a Snake

Jusqu'au nombril, elle avait l'apparence d'une femme,
et elle peignait ses cheveux; à partir du nombril, elle
avait une énorme queue de serpent...terriblement
longue...

-Jean d'Arras, *Roman de Mélusine*

Luce Irigaray keeps her distance from her texts, for fear of what? Lest they maim, or kill?¹⁰⁹ Or is it out of reverence for their sacred power? It is, after all, "extremely likely that the legend of Mélusine," tale with a perilous tail, "was a *sacred* text."¹¹⁰ Jean d'Arras, whose name is on the first written version of *Mélusine* we know, the 1392 *Roman de Mélusine*, was certainly working with popular myth from Poitou. This creature "is an anomaly: woman, she is also man. Goddess, she is also mortal."¹¹¹ Even from this (apparent) beginning, the Mélusine legend has a double influence: a relation with Celtic mythology, and a link with the myths of the Mother-G*ddess.

The story, in brief, drawn from Jean d'Arras' version and others: Pressine, a g*ddess who can assume human form, has three girls –

¹⁰⁹ As indeed *her* texts are accused of doing.

¹¹⁰ Jean Markale, *Mélusine*, 10, my translation.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 17, my translation.

Mélusine, Mélior, and Palestine – by the King of Albanie/Scotland, Élinas. He has promised never to see her bathing, for she doesn't want him to know she is not human. One day he indeed sees her bathing, and she flees with the daughters to Avalon. For revenge the sisters, led by Mélusine, close their father up in a mountain. Pressine, furious that the daughters have acted against their father, curses them. Mélusine's curse is that every Saturday she will become a snake from her navel down, and that she will have to find man to marry who will promise never to see her on Saturdays. If she accomplishes this, she will be a human the rest of the time and will live and die as a human; if she does not, she will live forever, snake-woman.

Mélusine marries Raimondin, who agrees that she may go off on her own each Saturday. The first eight of Mélusine's children are born deformed. One Saturday Raimondin, curious about rumors that Mélusine is a spirit, goes to find her. Finding her iron door locked, he looks through the keyhole. "Down to her belly, she appeared as a woman, and she was combing her hair; from the belly down, she had a huge snake's tail, thick as a herring barrel, terribly long, with which she slapped the water that spurted almost to the entrance of the room."¹¹² Raimondin screamed,

¹¹² "Jusqu'au nombril, elle avait l'apparence d'une femme, et elle peignait ses cheveux; à partir du nombril, elle avait une énorme queue de serpent, grosse comme un tonneau pour mettre des harengs, terriblement longue, avec laquelle elle battait l'eau qu'elle faisait gicler jusqu'à la

damning Mélusine to live out forever her mother's curse; to this day, a *cri de Mélusine* is a proverbial expression for a sudden scream, recalling that which let Mélusine know of Raimondin's indiscretion.¹¹³

This tale remains alive for us today, from Keats' "Lamia" to Goethe's "A New Melusine," in characters from Échidna to Lamia, Pandora to Medea, Eurydice to Lucine, Morgan to Lilith. Patent product of patriarchal culture, the story is organized around several axes. There is the need to explain and historicize "feminine" spirits perceived in wood, field, water, and house, nymphs, ondines, sprites, fairies. There is the curse of the mother against the daughters to punish them for attacking their father, marvelous illustration of women keeping each other in line, intergenerationally, in relation to masculine authority. There is the proscription against seeing the woman nude, segregation and exiling of the reality of feminine sexuality by the male, terrorized by the *monstrous* aspects of feminine sexuality. And there is the male gaze, organizing, determining, punishing, authorizing, narrating. "Patriarchy...is a myth which, because it doesn't stand back to question itself, takes itself to be the only order possible. That's why we tend to think of myths as

voûte de la salle." Translation from Jean d'Arras by Jean Markale, *Mélusine, ou l'androgyné*, 55, my translation into English.

¹¹³ Similarly, in Poitiers, still, gingerbread cakes with human head and serpent tail are called *mélusines*. What is the distance, I wonder, between a *mélusine* and a *madeleine*?

representing secondary realities rather than as one of the principal expressions of what orders society at any given time.”¹¹⁴

While it is obvious that the character Mélusine has relations of identity or similarity with many other female characters belonging to other legends dispersed not only in the Celtic tradition but also in other socio-cultural bodies, I want to stress the comparison between Mélusine and Lilith, doubtless the most striking example of the deep presence of the myth in our western culture. Lilith, of course, is surrounded by mystery, and that makes her even more than a myth: she is one of the central organizing points for feminine identity in patriarchal culture.

“Lilith,” of course is practically absent from the Bible. She is mentioned only once, in Isaiah 34:14: “Wildcats shall meet with hyenas, goat-demons shall call to each other; there too Lilith shall repose, and find a place to rest.” The Jerusalem Bible also has her in Job 18:15. Jerome, in the Vulgate, translated Lilith as Lamia, which must have been a conforming with oral tradition of his day, reinforcing the connection among all these myths and, unfortunately, underscoring their interchangeability at the hands of male story tellers. We need to revive

¹¹⁴ Luce Irigaray, “Religious and Civil Myths,” in *je, tu, nous*, 23-24.

Lilith to undo the violence of western christianization, not to recover a more perfect time in the past, but to offer, to describe, a model.

Mélusine is perhaps distinguished from other fairy spirits by her serpent's tail, variously open to interpretation. For Christians, Mélusine is the sister of these incubi against which the Church never stops fighting, which battle, of course, reinscribes belief in their existence.¹¹⁵ The church finds such beliefs embarrassing today and dismisses those who believe in the existence of creatures who can take the appearance of beautiful young women and marry mortals. But these ancient superstitions are deeply entrenched in culture. Those who construct their theologies away from Rome will refuse to believe in the eternal damnation of beneficent beings to whom they so often have begged for help and protection.

There is interesting ambiguity that comes from this stance, especially striking in the case of Mélusine. In most versions – granted, heavily *Christianized* – she is a “good Christian”: she goes to mass, she raises her children in a way based on the ten commandments and the chivalrous code of honor, and she even *builds a church*. However, she is serpent every Saturday, that is, the day of the Sabbath. Her real power, though is not in her observance of *that* culture which she has adopted, but

¹¹⁵ In order to be persuaded of the vigor of this ceaseless struggle, reread the *Décrits* of Burchard of Worms, who died in 1024.

in her faithfulness to her own culture, the curse-of-the-mother. Her power and her potential happiness – living as a human – is inextricably tied to the re-taking of her animal form.¹¹⁶ In this mythic story as in so many, once again: woman as virtuous, woman as monstrous.

Making Sense of g*d?

The divine is one of the most controversial aspects of Irigaray's latest work, and yet within the context I have outlined it makes sense...

-Margaret Whitford¹¹⁷

In contrast to even her most astute readers such as Margaret Whitford, for Luce Irigaray, the activity of making sense is neither straight-forward not *to be achieved*. Philosophically, psychoanalytically, theologically, it must be all-out, dangerous, “a risk taken at every

¹¹⁶ There is an interesting inconsistency in Jean D'Arras' version of the tale: Mélusine pays her workers faithfully every Saturday, yet this is also the day on which Melusine must not be seen. Could it be that this further shows, in a vivid, *irrational* way, the double nature of “woman” as constructed by the masculine gaze of patriarchy?

¹¹⁷ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, 140.

moment by the poet, that seeker after a still sacred ether."¹¹⁸ "Coming to grips" is too easy, too much a safe-making domestication by those of us "trained" to read texts, though the phrase clearly, insistently, has to do with the experience of grappling with one's own reading process.¹¹⁹ Luce Irigaray writes, instead, that "anyone who does not go down into the abyss can only repeat and retrace the ways already opened that cover over the trace of the vanished gods."¹²⁰ The way beyond sense-making "is through risk, only risk, leading no one knows where, announcing who knows what future.... No project here: only this refusal to refuse what has been perceived, whatever distress or wretchedness may come of it."¹²¹

As Morny Joy points out, throughout her writing career Luce Irigaray has worked in and on religious themes.¹²² For instance, she asks why traditional readings of the Gospels ignore stories *among* women, such as "the good relations between Mary and Anne, Mary and Elizabeth, etc., Mary and the other women. Even though this corner of society does form a part of the 'Good News,' few texts or sermons transmit or teach its

¹¹⁸ Luce Irigaray, "He Risks Who Risks Life Itself," in *Irigaray Reader*, 213. A more faithful translation of the title of this essay, the final section of *L'oubli de l'air*, which has no *person* in French, might be "S/he Risks Who Risks Life Itself." This is Luce Irigaray's all-out reading of Heidegger, risking everything.

¹¹⁹ The phrase, at least in relation to the work of Luce Irigaray, is Naomi Schor's, in her essay "This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray."

¹²⁰ Luce Irigaray, "Belief Itself," in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 50.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹²² Morny Joy, "Equality or Divinity – A false dichotomy?," in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 6 (1):9.

message.”¹²³ Or she asserts that “most of the gods of the universe start out as goddesses,” a fact obliterated by the hostile patriarchal takeover of men-g*ds.¹²⁴ Thus Luce Irigaray joins with her sisters who outright proclaim themselves feminist theologians in suggesting ways feminist reflection might reconfigure our interpretation of religious myths and texts – indeed, our understanding of religion and of spirituality – so that the place of women is not eclipsed.

However, her more recent work includes more subtle and complex articulations of the connections between feminism and theology, including her thesis that a feminist reconceptualization of divinity would have broad cultural significance. Many feminist theologians have insisted on the articulation of a feminine g*d from largely unexamined credal stances of personal faith in g*d. This is significant work that has begun to effect important theo-ethical and -political shifts. There are good reasons to take on androcentric religious discourse simply because it remains so “extremely powerful – whatever one’s personal beliefs about the reference of transcendental statements.”¹²⁵ Luce Irigaray further observes that “it seems we are unable to eliminate or suppress the phenomenon of

¹²³ Luce Irigaray, “Love of Self,” in *Ethics*, 68.

¹²⁴ Luce Irigaray, “Women, the Sacred, Money,” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 80.

¹²⁵ Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, 140.

religion” – taking the referent as not transcendental but as, indeed, referential, cultural, historical.¹²⁶

For Luce Irigaray there are broad implications for developing a feminist philosophy of religion. She insists that no revision of women’s subjectivity and identity can be achieved without the articulation of a feminine divine. Her argument is founded on her account of the intrinsic relationship between sexed identity structures and the role of g*ds as symbolic archetypes. Luce Irigaray goes beyond a mandate for the transformation of religious philosophy by feminist reflection and suggests, further, and more radically, that a substantial reconfiguring of feminist reflection is not possible without reconfiguring philosophical conceptions of divinity.

G*d plays a vital role in Luce Irigaray’s theories, where g*d is figured as the material resistance of women’s bodies to the cultural constructions that have barred women’s pleasure. She goes further, yet, daringly, to locate this material resistance, this opacity, in ‘woman’s’ hole, where she is said to lack: “God, not ‘woman,’ is a crack, a lack, a gap – the fracture we need for conceiving new pleasures.”¹²⁷ Like other terms in Luce Irigaray’s discourse, g*d is a symbolic category – like *sang rouge*, or

¹²⁶ Luce Irigaray, “Women, the Sacred, Money,” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 75.

¹²⁷ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *God Between Their Lips*, 50.

semblance, or gold – “although it is perhaps rather more difficult to handle, because of the enormous weight of symbolic meaning it already bears.”¹²⁸ Because Feuerbach claimed g*d is the mirror of *man*, Luce Irigaray claims that “women lack a mirror for becoming women.”¹²⁹ She insists that “if anything divine is still to come our way,” it will come only by abandoning “all control, all language, and all sense already produced.”¹³⁰

In “Divine Women,” Luce Irigaray extends her argument for a culture of sexual difference beyond legal, civic, and linguistic reforms to include the generation of a feminine divine.¹³¹ Here she makes bold claims for the role of divinity in the cultivation of human subjectivity and society. “Divinity is what we need to become free, autonomous, sovereign. No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine.”¹³² Luce Irigaray asserts that there is a connection between the absence of an autonomous subjectivity for women and the fact that “woman lacks a divine made in her image.”¹³³

¹²⁸ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, 140.

¹²⁹ Luce Irigaray, “Divine Women,” in *Sexes et parentés*, 79, my translation.

¹³⁰ Luce Irigaray, “Belief Itself,” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 53.

¹³¹ Luce Irigaray’s use of the term “sexual difference” is central to her work, yet it is variously interpreted. For extensive discussion of this concept and the range of (mis)understandings it has engendered, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, xvii and 14, and Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, 9-25.

¹³² Luce Irigaray, “Divine Women,” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 62.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 63.

Divinity, as Luce Irigaray configures it, is indeed the very *mechanism* not only of subjectivity but of language: "If women have no God, they are either to communicate or commune with one another."¹³⁴ In her Feuerbachian model, g*d = the Unconscious, from which Woman is excluded, as Luce Irigaray argues extensively in her early writings. And because of this absence, this exclusion, Woman "lacks an ideal that would be her goal or path in becoming."¹³⁵

Luce Irigaray argues here that symbolic g*ds play a role crucial to human identity, that, indeed, *man* is "able to exist" because of his identification with a patriarchal (male, paternal) g*d.¹³⁶ Further, she argues that no divinity and no other symbolic structure in western culture functions equivalently for women. Finally, she interprets the absence of a specifically feminine divinity as central to women's deficient identity, subjectivity, and community: not only deficient, that is, in relation to men's, but *without* identity, *without* subjectivity, and *without* community *except in relation to men*. In order to create a culture of sexual difference, Luce Irigaray states, one in which women were not "cut off from themselves and from one another," a feminine divine must be created.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Ibid., 62.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 63-64.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 61.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 64.

Of course, the suggestion of women as lacking in identity, subjectivity, and community has enraged many readers (and many non-readers) of Luce Irigaray and has set them against her, bringing about charges of essentialism and elitism. And while I do not wish to set about defending Luce Irigaray from her accusers, I must here say that I take Luce Irigaray's claim of Woman's lack philosophically, historically, and theologically – that is to say, figuratively – not as saying that women are not conscious subjects but rather that “the ‘feminine’ is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex.”¹³⁸ Luce Irigaray's original delineation of this argument is wide-ranging and relies on her close readings of the representation of women in the corpus of philosophy and psychoanalysis.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex*, 69. See also, in her essay on Freud in the same volume of essays: “The feminine will be allowed and even obliged to return in such oppositions as: be/become, have/not have sex (organ), phallic/non-phallic, penis/clitoris or else penis/vagina, plus/minus, clearly representable/dark continent, logos/silence or idle chatter, desire for the mother/desire to be the mother, etc.” (22).

¹³⁹ It is persistently difficult to read Luce Irigaray outside of the quite different context of the Anglo-American feminist debate around essentialism. However, “when Irigaray is called essentialist by Anglo-American critics, she looks puzzled.” Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, 135. To our eyes, perhaps, Luce Irigaray seems to collapse all women under apparently essentialist terms such as “feminine identity” or “feminine subjectivity,” but her analyses are far too complex and subtle to be understood as suggesting that all women should (or could) be represented by a singular, homogenizing, monolithic Identity. For reviews of the essentialist/essentialism controversy, see Grosz, “A Note on Essentialism and Difference,” in *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*, ed. Sneja Gunew, and the essays in *The Essential Difference*, eds. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed.

One of Luce Irigaray's most devoted readers, Margaret Whitford, notes the frequent apparent contradictions in Luce Irigaray's writing – as often as she speaks against providing definitions of “woman,” she argues that women need a “generic identity.”¹⁴⁰ One of the ways in which I negotiate Luce Irigaray's contradictory gestures is to interpret her “identity politics” as an attempt to call into question, even to subvert, our very notions of what identity means. This subversion, particularly as it is contextualized theologically, this radical transformation of the concepts both of identity and divinity, is an important part of Luce Irigaray's project.

In her earliest texts, Luce Irigaray argues, in ground-breaking and poorly understood contentions, that man's *identity* in terms of rational and positive qualities is dependent on the role of woman as “other,” as negative alter ego, as “mirror” to the masculine. “Phallic currency can immediately be assumed to need its other, a sort of inverted or negative alter ego – “*black*” too, like a photographic negative. Inverse, contrary, contradictory even, necessary.”¹⁴¹ Inasmuch as masculine identity depends on the feminine, it can be interpreted as peculiarly fragile.¹⁴² And

¹⁴⁰ Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, 135.

¹⁴¹ Luce Irigaray, “The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry,” in *Speculum*, 22.

¹⁴² No wonder so many men, and many women, resist “feminism.” It's a fearsome thing!

thus, Luce Irigaray goes on, the conditions of possibility of masculine identity are paradoxical. At the same time, though, the feminine as absence and negativity seems conceptually dependent on the notion of masculinity as presence and positivity. The feminine as *irrational* appears to be secondary to the notion of the masculine as *rational*, but Luce Irigaray argues just the opposite: that the positive, privileged concept of the *masculine* is generated through its opposition to its “negative mirror,” the *feminine*. The construct “masculine” thus both *is* and *is not* conceptually dependent on the “feminine.”¹⁴³ The same x/not-x dichotomous disposition that produces from the feminine the identity of masculinity as presence, positivity, autonomy, and privilege also renders the masculine secondary to the feminine: masculine identity depends on its opposition to the feminine. For Luce Irigaray, the negative “interpretive modalities of the female function” in fact sustain the masculine.¹⁴⁴

Luce Irigaray takes up a second paradox in the construction of masculine identity as presence and positivity: woman is constructed as nothing but man’s negative mirror but is also rendered as excess to her role as negative mirror. Because this present and positive representation

¹⁴³ Luce Irigaray wants to argue that the *feminine* is precisely what is excluded in and by such binary oppositions as male/female.

¹⁴⁴ Luce Irigaray, “The Blind Spot,” in *Speculum*, 22.

of masculinity depends on its opposition to the feminine as absence, any intimation of a remainder to the feminine role as negative alter ego to the masculine destabilizes masculine identity. Luce Irigaray indicates this paradox: the cultural effort of producing the feminine as negative other is itself an indication of a possible feminine surpassing of its role as man's negative other. The representation that reduces the feminine to man's other simultaneously indicates that there is a remainder to that representation and thereby destabilizes itself.¹⁴⁵

For instance, Luce Irigaray uses the metaphor of materiality to describe the concept of remainder. Of course, woman has been associated with materiality, ground, earth, matter.¹⁴⁶ Luce Irigaray mimics this association by taking the metaphor of materiality to describe the feminine as the matter out of which man fashions his alter ego, and goes on to argue that if this indeed is what has happened, then woman, as the matter out of which the masculine alter ego is made, must be in excess of that making. Woman-as-matter is in excess of any particular fashioning, use,

¹⁴⁵ "Her possession by a 'subject'...is yet another of his vertiginous failures....Even as man seeks to rise higher and higher – in his knowledge too – so the ground fractures more and more beneath his feet," Luce Irigaray, "Any Theory of the 'Subject' Has Always Been Appropriated by the 'Masculine,'" in *Speculum*, 134. Here, the feminine ground could be said to fracture in the sense that, constituting the feminine as his ground, his mirror to catch his reflection, man simultaneously constitutes an other which exceeds and resists his projects of representation. Luce Irigaray also suggests that the feminine exceeds the place of negative mirror insofar as woman has to exercise effort to masquerade as negative mirror. See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex*, 84.

¹⁴⁶ To go to one of the sources of western philosophy, see Plato's *Timaeus* 51b, taken up by Jacques Derrida in *Dissemination*, 160-161.

or manipulation of that feminine matter. Woman is conceptually in excess of and is the remainder of her role as negative mirror.

Luce Irigaray does not directly argue that sexual difference is a real social fact and that women are simply misrepresented in terms of atrophy. Where she describes the feminine as exceeding its representation Luce Irigaray does not insist on the traditional western philosophical distinction between the *truth* of woman and the *representation* of woman.¹⁴⁷ Instead, she argues that the representation *itself* is paradoxical and self-destabilizing – always already. Representation limits the feminine to atrophy but destabilizes itself by indicated the possibility of excess. This paradox suggests feminine-as-excess as a subversive hypothetical possibility, excluded from language and culture in the present moment.¹⁴⁸ This critical maneuver takes place without reference to the supposed

¹⁴⁷ Significantly, in her comments on Freud's work on femininity, she does not argue that Freud misrepresents women but rather locates the internal contradictions which disrupt the coherence of Freud's account. In fact, rather than rejecting Freud's description as false or biased or blind, she argues that he "describes an actual state of affairs" – of *representation*, that is. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex*, 70.

¹⁴⁸ The exclusion of sexual difference destabilizes itself precisely through the effort of exclusion. Thinkers such as John McGowan suggest that there is a fatal dilemma for postmodern theory which attempts to articulate the exclusion of difference, but they are wrong. For McGowan, one cannot say both that nothing escapes from culture's signifying processes and also that a capitalist social order is not inclusive enough, for instance (John McGowan, *Postmodernism and Its Critics*, 21-23). This would suggest that it is inconsistent to argue that patriarchal culture excludes all sexual difference. If it has been excluded, how can we indicate the concept at all? But Luce Irigaray argues that patriarchal culture is based not so much on the *exclusion* of sexual difference as on the paradox by which sexual difference must be *both* excluded *and also*, but virtue of that exclusion, included. Thus, the exclusion of sexual difference both *reinforces* and *destabilizes* patriarchal culture.

“truth” of woman and without attempt to describe what women are “really like” as opposed to how women are represented – as if these levels could be clearly distinguished. Luce Irigaray suggests it is possible to trace in the text of the history of philosophy not only the representation of woman as lack and atrophy but also the simultaneous, concomitant, inevitable undoing of that representation. These moments of self-destruction, where the text “gives itself away,” occur where, in the midst of representing woman as man’s negative other, a text indirectly indicates the possibility of a feminine identity in excess of that role.

Early in her work, borrowing from both Derrida’s and Lacan’s thinking on x/not-x oppositions, Luce Irigaray takes pains to show that the paradoxical exclusion of any feminine exceeding feminine-as-atrophy is a condition of possibility of the man/woman dichotomy. In her more recent work, she also turns, pivotally, to the relationships between man/g*d oppositions and man/woman oppositions. She now argues that, along with the positioning of the feminine-as-atrophy, a particular conceptualization of g*d is also necessary to the production of masculine identity.

An Ethics of Theological Difference

And if, by chance, you were to have the impression of not having yet understood everything, then perhaps you would do well to leave your ears half-open for what is in such close touch with itself that it confounds your discretion.

-Luce Irigaray¹⁴⁹

Throughout, Luce Irigaray's texts argue that the western patriarchal g*d is the ideal ego. The relationship between *man* and this g*d is such that "some [male] One has taken on omnipotence as one of his attributes, and the child can 'fantasize' himself identical to Him – to an ideal ego."¹⁵⁰ In her reading of Nietzsche, *Marine Lover*, Luce Irigaray writes that:

This figure of love [Christ/g*d] must continue to be unique, remaining, eternally captive to the lure of a [male] Same.... Is it not the pattern for the mask that completes, to the point of inappearance, man's identity with himself? The dream of becoming the self without contradictions, of reabsorbing into the self all

¹⁴⁹ Luce Irigaray, "The 'Mechanics' of Fluids," in *This Sex*, 118.

¹⁵⁰ Luce Irigaray, "Plato's Hystera," in *Speculum*, 356.

things opposed and different, of subsuming under the self the transcendent of oneself. Of one day finally being divinely the self.¹⁵¹

Here, g*d is presented as guarantor of masculine identity, identificatory figure for masculine perfection. In "Divine Women," Luce Irigaray reformulates the same point with a different terminology: "Man is able to exist because God helps him to define his gender [genre]. The revival of religious feeling can in fact be interpreted as the rampart man raises in defense of his very maleness. To posit a gender [genre], a God is necessary: guaranteeing the infinite."¹⁵² Through this guarantee, this caution, Luce Irigaray describes both the identificatory function played by the patriarchal g*d and also the role divine figures play in various traditional philosophical contexts in relation to the man of reason. Echoing Mary Daly and others, Luce Irigaray writes that "man has been the subject of discourse, whether in theory, morality, or politics. And the gender of God, the guardian of every subject and every discourse, is always masculine and paternal, in the West."¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover*, 186-87.

¹⁵² Luce Irigaray, "Divine Women," in *Sexes*, 61.

¹⁵³ Luce Irigaray, "Sexual Difference," in *Ethics*, 6.

Divine figures provide the ultimate horizon toward which the “man of reason” moves in his pursuit of knowledge. In this search *man* displaces his material, passionate, unreliable, and sensuous nature onto the figure of the feminine. Both the patriarchal g*d and the feminine have been conceptualized to describe and to reinforce masculine identity. G*d provides the horizon and the feminine takes up the slack, or excess, representing, in body, flesh, sensuality, that from which *man* needs to be distanced in his approach toward g*d and Truth.

Luce Irigaray’s proposal, then, is that masculine identity is constructed both through the figure of woman as his negative alter ego and also through g*d as his ideal ego. Just as the role of the feminine destabilizes masculine identity in supporting it, so g*d’s role? G*d may act as guarantor to masculine identity, but g*d is also its blind spot. Luce Irigaray insists that man, as the “Son” in relation to the image of g*d-the-father, can neither know nor admit “how much that image owes and denies to specular projection and inversion. He would already [otherwise] have recognized that the ‘father’ is that which is reproduced in him in order (not) to be mirrored in his absence of self: the cover over a blind spot in consciousness which he fails to recognize.”¹⁵⁴ The masculine owes

¹⁵⁴ Luce Irigaray, “Plato’s *Hystera*,” in *Speculum*, 314.

a debt to the divine image of the “father,” but this debt must also, always, be denied. In both the cases of the patriarchal ideal ego and the feminine other, Luce Irigaray insists that masculine identity relies on its (feminine, divine) foundations *at the same time that* it is compromised by them.

Luce Irigaray argues that the masculine is aligned with a divine ideal ego of immateriality, autonomy, omniscience, and self-identity, at the same time that it is dependent on the identification with the divine “in order not to be mirrored in his absence (of self).”¹⁵⁵ The divine is an ideal of self-coincidence and self-sufficiency of which the masculine inevitably falls short. In order not to be mirrored in his absence of self: it is not clear whether the masculine identifies with an ideal (divine) mirror in order to be reflected as an atrophied version or in order not to be reflected as an absence of divine self. In other words, man is both opposed to and aligned with the divine.¹⁵⁶ As *man’s* ideal, g*d must be simultaneously the opposite of *man* and the image of *man’s* perfection. It is as *man’s* opposite – immortal versus mortal, infinite versus finite, disembodied versus embodied – that g*d is figured as *man’s* ideal. G*d thus becomes *man’s*

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ This problematic can be traced to Augustine’s *Confessions*, among other places, where *man* is both like and not like g*d. G*d serves as *man’s* ideal of perfection. The ideal trait of *man* is thus, in relation to the ideal divine identity, the most disembodied aspect – reason or soul. *Man’s* identity must also be opposed to g*d as human and material. There is, too, concurrent identification of women as both like *man* and not like *man*.

absence of *divine* self in the same moment that g*d provides the impossible ideal with which *man* identifies. Inasmuch as masculine identity is constructed and kept going by impossible ideals, its identificatory structure is fragile. The radical divide projected between the realms of *man* and g*d is precisely what produces g*d as an ideal other, but it is also, precisely, what leaves *man* severed from his ideal.

Luce Irigaray observes that in Plato's account of *man* aiming at contemplation of the Good, the mind's grasp can only have an intuition of Being, and, at that, only at the rarest and highest moments. "Being does not appear or even appear to appear. It slips away from the mind's grasp even as it forms the foundation of mind.... Here, then, man does not yet have the plenitude of Being within him, but instead a whole range of theoretical tools...a whole technique of philosophy and even of artistic practice, are being worked out to form a matrix of appropriation for man."¹⁵⁷ The problem with the *man* of reason's objective, represented by a divine ideal, is the necessary evanescence of g*d. Thus Luce Irigaray reads *man*'s identification with g*d as an appropriation of plenitude, of divine Being: it is an appropriation – that is, it is inappropriate – because *man* privileges reason and its "tools" – "geometric, mathematical,

¹⁵⁷ Luce Irigaray, "Kore: Young Virgin, Pupil of the Eye," in *Speculum*, 150-151.

discursive, dialogic”¹⁵⁸ – in opposition to a devalued femininity – body, emotion, passions – on the strength of *man*’s identification with a divine ideal, and identification which the same logic renders incoherent.

G*d thus is fragile guarantor of masculine identity: the schism between *man* and g*d renders g*d a meaningful, transcendent ideal at the same moment that it leaves *man* cut off from his own guarantor. Conceptually adrift as moral limitation, somewhere between an ideal of being *like g*d* and radically *not like g*d*, *man* promises himself eventual communion with the divine only on condition of transcending his mortality, his physicality, his embodied materiality. The promised becoming-immortal of *man*, *animal prometteur*, is always, already separated from the divine.

This simultaneous identification with and severing from a transcendent ideal is linked with the appropriation of the feminine as a negative-feminine which sustains masculine identity. The terms according to which the masculine is opposed to the feminine and the feminine depreciated are, in fact, the terms of an ideal of which the masculine necessarily falls short. This necessitates the role of the feminine as negative other to complement, to bolster, an otherwise (but also,

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 151.

already, always, necessarily) decayed, dried up, drooping masculine identity.

If, as I mean to be arguing here, Luce Irigaray proposes a g*d of difference – sexual, ontological, theological difference – it is as “a *sensible transcendental* coming into being through us, of which *we would be* the mediators and the bridges. Not only in mourning for the dead God of Nietzsche, nor awaiting the god passively, but bringing the god to life through us, in a resurrection or transfiguration of blood and flesh through our language and our ethic.”¹⁵⁹ This g*d supersedes and is in response to, for instance, Heidegger’s involvement in pathologizing a culture he denounced and from which, he claimed, only a g*d can save us. This response, this supersession, this parousia, this horizon of difference, is of g*d not as distant event but as possible here and now. It opens the possible: of an undreamed-of fertility, a re-creation of the world. This second coming is not simply of a utopian, apolitical future, but, emphatically, the construction by women and men in the present of a bridge between past and future, the conversation of women and men *into* being the bridges themselves.¹⁶⁰ This horizon, right around the mind’s corner, is Luce Irigaray’s Third Era: the age of the spirit, and the bridge

¹⁵⁹ Luce Irigaray, *Éthique*, 124, my translation.

¹⁶⁰ Luce Irigaray, “Love of the Other,” *Ethics*, 147.

beyond what she terms the old testament reign of father and the new testament reign of the son.¹⁶¹

The end of a culture as we know it would correspond also necessarily to the death of g*d. Which g*d? He who forms the transcendental keystone of a discourse used by a single gender, of a monosexual truth. This would allow the return of the divine, of the g*d who preaches neither truth nor morality but who seeks to live with us and allow us to live here. The cries and words of the last philosophers, of Nietzsche and Heidegger, about the death of g*d are a summons for the divine to return as festival, grace, love, thought. "Contrary to the usual interpretation made of them, these philosophers are not talking about the disappearance of the gods but about the approach of the annunciation of another parousia of the divine. Which involves the remolding of the world, of discourse: another morning, a new era in history, in the universe."¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 148.

¹⁶² Ibid., 140.

Woman | g*d – Re/figuration of Divinity

Does parousia correspond to the expectation of a future not only as a *utopia* or a *destiny* but also as a *here and now*, the willed construction of a bridge in the present between the past and the future?

-Luce Irigaray¹⁶³

Luce Irigaray contends that masculine/feminine oppositions are sustained by transcendent figures (of speech | Beings) through a paradoxical identificatory structure, and this interpretation determines the strategies she proposes for subverting masculine/feminine oppositions. Most readers of Luce Irigaray prefer to take up her strategic evocation of a hypothetical feminine in excess of any x/not-x framework; they invariably leave aside any discussion of theological aspects of this framework.¹⁶⁴ But Luce Irigaray's subversive strategies importantly (and increasingly) include her articulation of a relationship between the divine and the feminine – *divine* and *feminine*, here, especially contra their conceptualization by masculine identities. Luce Irigaray's critique of x/not-x representations of masculine and feminine includes

¹⁶³ Luce Irigaray, "The Invisible of the Flesh," in *Ethics*, 163.

¹⁶⁴ Exceptions to this generalization are the work of Elizabeth Grosz, Margaret Whitford, and Morny Joy.

reformulating the relationship of both sexes with/within the concepts of transcendence and divinity – in implicit recognition of, and direct response to, the interconnection of masculine/feminine oppositions with the impossible masculine ideals that traditionally sustain such oppositions. To answer how we adequately can analyze *man's* opposition to the feminine, Luce Irigaray frames the context of sustaining the opposition: the patriarchal g*d.

Luce Irigaray interprets the fact that *man* and g*d are widely represented in terms of distance, in terms of a schism, between them, as *the* source of evil, as *the* original sin – hardly surprising, given her reading of the displacement of devalued qualities onto the feminine in terms of *man's* identification with an impossible, transcendent ideal. This dissociation of the human and the divine, this evil, this sin, consists “in making God into a distinct and transcendent entity. With the expulsions from the ‘earthly paradise’ corresponding to the will to know God as such. To the desire to produce *him* as a ‘suprasensory’ reality? God = Different? And this would be the source of evil, in the beginning.”¹⁶⁵ The tragedy of *man's* banishment is not that he is expelled from a state of innocence or paradisaal plenitude, but rather that he is discontinuous

¹⁶⁵ Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover*, 173.

from the g*d/father with whom he identifies. This is tragic in feminist terms, not because we might lament *man's* discontinuity from the divine as such, but because the fate of the feminine as constructed by *man*, as *man's* other, is interconnected with *man's* identification with an ideal he's cut off from. The schism between *man* and g*d is the source of evil because this division between *man* and a projected transcendent ideal entity has been fatal for the role of the feminine as *man's* other.

The projection of a mythical transcendent realm has served to legitimate hierarchies ranking *man*, woman, the material, sensory realms, and animals. The projection of the transcendent, the schism between the transcendent and the actual, and representations of *man* as both divided from and yet able to approach that transcendent realm, are supported by the organization of the feminine, the bodily, the material, the sensuous, the irrational, as *man's* other. Woman's banishment to the role of *man's* other happens when *man's* role is in the mode of being like unto g*d. Sin and suffering do not occur because we, women and men, are cast out of paradise, but because *man* takes on g*d as his ideal, an impossible, extraterrestrial, beyond-utopian ideal: "Surely evil, sin, suffering, redemption, arise when G*d is set up as an extraterrestrial ideal, as an

otherworldly monopoly, when the divine is manufactured as God-Father.”¹⁶⁶

Luce Irigaray’s suggestion is that any remodeling of man/woman relations necessarily would involve a three-way reconceptualization of *man*/divine relations, feminine/divine relations, and of the role of the divine in relation to the masculine and feminine, with the divine imagined and understood so as, precisely, to undermine the human/divine schism. If *man* did not identify with an impossible divine ideal, woman might not be appropriated as his negative mirror. The conclusion, then, is that the divine generally should not be figured as transcendent in relation to the human. Luce Irigaray understands the representation of the divine as continuous with the human, rather than severed from it, as a task central to feminism.

Still, men and women need identificatory structures, and from this comes Luce Irigaray’s question: do women, too, need some kind of divine with which to identify? If yes, it is important it not be structurally figured in terms like those of the patriarchal g*d. What about a relationship between the feminine and the divine in which women would understand “a divine that was not opposed to them, perhaps? That was not even

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

distinct from them."¹⁶⁷ Proceeding with the understanding that women in fact need a divine of their own, at least until the present hegemonic theological structures stop leaving their traces, Luce Irigaray invents a concept whereby a feminine divine would serve some of the functions in relation to women that the patriarchal g*d has served for *men*, without entailing the problems produced by *man/g*d* schisms.

She deploys the term *feminine divine* widely. It is the wonder, the transcendence, that could be *between* and *among* the sexes in a culture of sexual difference rather than between human and divine.¹⁶⁸ It is a horizon, a limit, and opening *beyond*.¹⁶⁹ It is beauty.¹⁷⁰ It is a form of love, "where the borders of the body are wed in an embrace that transcends all limits...each one discovers the self in that experience which is inexpressible yet forms the supple grounding of life and language. For this, 'God' is necessary, or a love so attentive that it is divine."¹⁷¹ It is that which women would become *for themselves*: women's fulfillment is divine.¹⁷² It is important to keep in mind this plural sense of divinity in

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Luce Irigaray, *Ethics*, 15. In brief, Luce Irigaray understands *sexual difference* as an ideal by which woman would not be defined in terms of diminished masculinity but as different from *man* in a positive sense. It is *not* a revaluation of traditionally *feminine* – that is, masculine-defined – characteristics such as passivity, emotionality, closeness to nature. Luce Irigaray tends toward a *between* conceptualization, *entre*, while I would push this toward *among*, *parmi*.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 17.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 32.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 18-19.

¹⁷² Luce Irigaray, "Divine Women," in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 71, 64.

order to read that “women need their own divine.” Here Luce Irigaray does just what she did when undoing the logic of identity when asserting the need for women to cultivate their own identity – changing “our notion of what identity means”¹⁷³ – and that is, precisely, to change our notion of what *divine* means. Sometimes transcendence, limit, radical difference, the beyond; sometimes the between, the among, love of other-as-difference. The ideal of woman’s identity is transformed into a new understanding of divinity.¹⁷⁴

If Luce Irigaray argues that women need their own divine apart from the patriarchal western g*d, her term is far from having supernatural connotations. This feminine divinity is awfully close to woman-as-difference and to the ideal of difference among the sexes. If “the only diabolical things about women is their lack of a God,” that *thing* is their place as lack, atrophy, and inverting, warping mirror to the masculine.¹⁷⁵

But the interchangeability of *divinity* and *sexual difference* raises some questions. What is served by so redefining the term *divine*? Why

¹⁷³ Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, 136.

¹⁷⁴ Luce Irigaray uses the term *woman’s identity* to evoke an alternative to women’s cultural role of fallen-off masculinity, not to assert the existence of an *essence* common to all women. She is profoundly *onto* the problems and traps of the discourse of identity politics.

¹⁷⁵ Luce Irigaray, “Divine Women,” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 64. This rich notion is a response, of course, to the long philosophical and theological tradition of associating *woman* with the diabolical.

deploy the concept of divinity, so redefined, in such contexts? Why does Luce Irigaray resolutely leave herself open to readers' understandably confused interpretations: "It is essential that we be God for ourselves"¹⁷⁶ – what?! Further, if Luce Irigaray insists there can be no substantial reorganization of feminine identity without a reconceptualization of the feminine divine, what is the *difference* between *feminine divine* and *feminine identity*? Does *divine* lose all specific meaning through its radical redefinition? Why not speak only of *sexual difference*? Why does Luce Irigaray use *divine* at all?

Luce Irigaray suggests, as I've tried to show, that woman in culture is devalued, as negative mirror, as not being those qualities of which the most pure instance is the masculine ideal ego represented by the patriarchal g*d. In his identification with that ideal, *man* falls short; to compensate, he displaces his *feminine* qualities onto the figure of woman so as to sustain his identification. Woman, as not *man's* ideal, supports the oppositional effect of *man* as identified with his ideal. It is as a result of these complex interrelations between masculinity and its ideal and negative alter ego figures that Luce Irigaray insists that the subversion of traditional man/woman dichotomies requires a concurrent critical

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 71.

intervention into the concept of divine ideals. This is an imperative: the divine must be reconceptualized and refigured in order to strip away its connotations of schism from the human.

Where Luce Irigaray speaks of relations between the sexes being divine, or of woman becoming her own g*d, divinity has evolved into yet another term for the ideal culture of sexual difference, where sexed objects would respect each other's distance and difference. Transcendence is located not between mortal and immortal beings but between people, women and men, women and women, men and men.¹⁷⁷ If love between people is described as divine, this implies an ideal relationship *of difference* from, and respect for, the other as other. In her terminological redefinition of divinity, the conventional characteristics Luce Irigaray retains are alterity and transcendence. She has stripped divinity of its supernatural connotations and the connotations of schism from the human, retained the term because of her desire to remodel and recast it, and relocated the conventional connotation of divinity – transcendence – to the realm of humans.

But there is one further role played by the conventional g*d which Luce Irigaray retains and reshapes for her feminine divine, and that is g*d

¹⁷⁷ I should perhaps write "wo/men," say, for I don't intend to limit the sexes to "women" and "men," to "female" and "male." See Minnie Bruce Pratt, *S/he*.

as guarantor, promise-maker and -keeper, shaper of identity and subjectivity. "Man is able to exist because God helps him to define his gender (genre), helps him orient his finiteness by reference to infinity.... In order to become, it is essential to have a gender (genre) or an essence¹⁷⁸ as horizon.... No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine."¹⁷⁹ "Man is supposedly woman's more perfect other, her model, her essence. The most human and the most divine goal woman can conceive is to become man. If she is to become woman, if she is to accomplish her female subjectivity, woman needs a god who is a figure for the perfection of her subjectivity."¹⁸⁰ Luce Irigaray wants for woman a field for the "perfection of her subjectivity," akin to *man's* horizon of perfection, a transcendent, patriarchal g*d. Woman *needing* a feminine divine means that women need a horizon of becoming, a field of infinite, open-ended feminine identities, in the context of which a woman could situate herself.

Some aspects of this feminine divine do constitute some kind of equivalent to the role played by a masculine divine in relation to man. Luce Irigaray's *divine* remains a "principle of the ideal, a projection of the

¹⁷⁸ Consequently a sexuate essence...

¹⁷⁹ Luce Irigaray, "Divine Women," in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 61-62.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

(sexed) subject onto the figure of perfection, an ego-ideal specific to that subject."¹⁸¹ Does she repeat, as an ideal for women, the same model that contains and sustains masculine subjectivity, in her view? Is her argument flawed, if she does? Is this inevitable? What is the status that women would have in relation to their figure of perfection, their ego-ideal? In "Divine Women," Luce Irigaray asserts that the feminine would not be analogous in structure to that g*d which has acted as ideal ego to the masculine: women would not be severed from their ideal.

"Why do we assume that God must always remain an inaccessible transcendence rather than a realization – here and now – in and through the body?," she asks.¹⁸² She speaks for a divine that would be "an inscription *in the flesh*," so further wrenching her redefinition of what divinity is.¹⁸³ If sexual difference were cultivated, and genderS allowed to develop, then, says Luce Irigaray, gender "could mark the place where spirit entered human nature, the point in time when the infinite passed into the finite, given that each individual is finite and potentially infinite in his or her relation to gender [*genre*]."¹⁸⁴ The *sensible transcendental* describes this divinity from which we are not severed: "A birth into a

¹⁸¹ Elizabeth Grosz, "Irigaray and the Divine," in *Transfigurations: Theology and the French Feminists*, 63.

¹⁸² Luce Irigaray, "Love of the Other," in *Ethics*, 148.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 147, my emphasis.

¹⁸⁴ Luce Irigaray, "The Universal as Mediation," in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 139.

transcendence, that of the other, still in the world of the senses, still physical and carnal, and already spiritual.”¹⁸⁵

A bridge.

Again: the bridge itself.¹⁸⁶

Gender/Genre and Divinity: An Axial Approach

Whoever writes a truth or makes a
pronouncement, above all concerning God,
should always add: *open* [*ouvert(e)*].

-Luce Irigaray¹⁸⁷

Luce Irigaray suggests that fully, consciously belonging to their
sexuate genre would be a means for women to situate themselves, as

¹⁸⁵ Luce Irigaray, “Wonder,” in *Ethics*, 82.

¹⁸⁶ To revisit, a bit. The schism between *man* and the patriarchal g*d is especially problematic because it renders g*d at once more idealized (not-*man*) and a more fragile support of identity. *Man* is left in a state of both *being* and *not being* atrophy, identifying with an ideal rendered all the more powerful by the fact that he is severed from it. And this leaves women associated with the weaker, atrophied position, since they are appropriated as the atrophied mirror reflection to sustain and already atrophied masculine. Luce Irigaray explicitly rejects this schism between human and divine in her conceptualization of a feminine divine. It is not figured as an ideal ego that the feminine is at once aligned with and opposed to. The feminine divine indeed serves as horizon of perfection in terms of which women can identify themselves, but the feminine divine exists only *through one's participation in it*: it disappears with the first hint of distance, or alienation, or severance.

¹⁸⁷ Luce Irigaray, “The Invisible of the Flesh,” in *Ethics*, 163.

finite, in the context of the infinite, with “infinite” *not* meaning the transcendent, the supernatural, or that which women are not, but rather that which is open-ended, in the process of becoming. Luce Irigaray advances the ideal of women situating themselves in the context of the horizon constituted by their genre, without any ideal that women would definitively become or accomplish themselves, and affirms the notion of the infinite as that which is always in a state of becoming. In this reconceptualized divinity, women, and humans more generally, are coextensive with and participate in the infinite: infinity is another figure for a divinity from which women are not severed.

While Luce Irigaray rejects the concept of transcendence in the context of women’s identificatory ideals, with no schism between women and the feminine genre, as there is between *man* and the figure of the patriarchal g*d, still she retains transcendence as an ideal of distance and difference among humans, among the sexes. Further, she uses the term *divine* to refer to both contexts: to transcendence between and among the sexes, and to the participation by women in their ideal horizon. And it is from this ambivalence around transcendence that Luce Irigaray comes to her axial model for relations, to a horizontal/vertical archetype on which

she arranges her understandings of divinity, at once rejecting and retaining the ideal of transcendence.

It would be commonsensically tempting to imagine that in Luce Irigaray's scheme horizontal refers to relations among women and between/among the sexes, while the vertical refers to relations between women and the divine, but her plural redefinitions of divinity make her schematizing not so neat and obvious.

The horizontal indeed refers to women's relations with others – with men or “among women, among ‘sisters.’”¹⁸⁸ But the vertical axis is more elaborate. Luce Irigaray wants to *reject* the notion of transcendence along this axis – where, for instance, she conceptualizes mother-daughter relations and the ideal of a feminine genealogy vertically.

The world of women must successfully create an ethical order [with] two vertical and horizontal dimensions: – daughter-to-mother, mother-to-daughter; among women.... In the same way, the vertical dimension is always being taken away from female becoming.... Female genealogy has to be suppressed, on behalf of the son-Father relationship, and the idealization of the father and

¹⁸⁸ Luce Irigaray, “Love of Same, Love of Other,” in *Ethics*, 108.

husband as patriarchs. But without a vertical dimension...a loving ethical order cannot take place among women. Within themselves, among themselves, women need both of these dimensions.¹⁸⁹

The vertical dimension is here the horizon of one's genre. It is the requisite identificatory context for women to situate themselves in terms of a horizon of symbolic, ideal models. The role a mother represents for her daughter, or a (pre)history of women, are examples of the vertical dimension of relations.

According to this metaphor, women would always be involved concurrently in self-other and in self-divine relations, always moving on both axes. Any relation between self and other would be mediated by divinity insofar as the vertical axis intersects with the horizontal axis. Any kind of relationship a woman has, with another woman or with a man, would be negotiated through the field of positive representations of women, symbolic figures of femininity, in the context of which a woman would place herself: in culture, in the sacred. And thus women's relationships – with herself, with other women, with men, with g*d – do

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

not take place from the starting point of second-best, of oppression, of disenfranchisement, of atrophy.

The ideal of transcendence is *retained* as existing between/among genders, between genres, in a culture of sexual difference. Relations between/among men and women take place in the horizontal dimension; *transcendence* between/ among them along this axis occurs with the arbitration of the vertical axis. Instead of being understood as the site of human-divine interaction, the vertical axis is reimagined as the dimension of female genealogy, of mother/daughter relations, of female ideals and role models, of female becoming, of the female genre. These human-divine vertical relations are not relations of transcendence: no schism is retained between women and the feminine divine, their identificatory horizon for becoming, because the feminine ideal is not defined as that which women radically are not. Indeed, women are coextensive with their vertical horizon of becoming.

If love among people is *divine*, it is because the horizontal, relational dimension is informed by the vertical, contextual, generic dimension. Love among people – women and women, women and men, men and men – might be divine in a culture of sexual difference if

mediated by the vertical axis and its positive symbolic identificatory context for women.

Luce Irigaray's notion of divinity is refigured and reconfigured such that it holds no traces of an inaccessible supernatural entity. Instead there is wonder at alterity in sexual difference; the sexually different other – and that can be *myself* (that part of me that is *not me*) or an other, a man, a woman, a cyborg – is elevated, or expanded, to the status of transcendent. The other as other is not given the connotations of the divine in the old sense of a supernatural g*d, but, rather, the notion of divine is reorganized to include an (ideal) encounter with the other. The divine includes the realm of ethico-legal-linguistic transformations which enable the recognition and institutionalization of sexual difference(s). It includes the horizon constituted by the feminine genre. These transformations constitute a vertical plane affirming the feminine, in which women participate at the same time as interacting with the other. And the mediation of woman's relation with the other by this ethical vertical plane renders her encounter with the other less inclined toward appropriation and abuse.

Mine or Yours? Self and Other

Is not God the name and the place that holds the
promise of a new chapter in history and that also
denies this can happen? Still invisible? (Yet) to (be)
discover(ed)? (Yet) to (be) incarnate(d)? Most ancient
and always future...

-Luce Irigaray¹⁹⁰

While Luce Irigaray has long been interested in the subversion of appropriative relations between self and other, recently her attention to these questions has been formulated in a theological context. She uses her axial schema to describe an ethics of mediation: intersection allows *mediation* between self and other such that one would not appropriate the other in the generation of one's own identity. Luce Irigaray observes that in our present culture¹⁹¹ relations among people – between women, between women and men, between men – tend inexorably toward the appropriation of the other. Appropriative relations occur wherever I relate to the other narcissistically, using her/him to tell me who I am and whether I am loved. Luce Irigaray plays with the phrase, "*J'aime à toi*," as

¹⁹⁰ Luce Irigaray, "Femmes Divines," in *Sexes et parentés*, 85, my translation.

¹⁹¹ That is, of patriarchy, not of sexual difference.

an emblem for the ideal relationship to the other which is divinely mediated rather than appropriative: I love to/toward you, rather than incorporating you in my love and in my-self. Luce Irigaray opposes this to formulations such as "I love you," which "always risk annihilating the alterity of the other."¹⁹² Such mediated self/other relations are her alternative to relations where the other is both appropriated in the production of one's own self-identity and also overridden such that one is unable to go out toward the other-as-other. One is left in a mode of self and (the other appropriated as) version of the self.

How does the tendency to appropriate the other arise from the relationship between masculine identity, women, and a patriarchal g*d? Luce Irigaray understands woman as appropriated in the generation of masculine identity and *man* as dependent on his appropriation of woman as his negative specular mirror. The patriarchal g*d is a flawed guarantor of masculine identity, and thus she does not replicate this structure as an ideal for the feminine divine: positioning g*d as not-man is the means of rendering g*d *man's* ideal, and man is thus left radically not-g*d and thus not his ideal. The projection of the patriarchal g*d does not provide adequate horizon, adequate ideal, for *man*.

¹⁹² Luce Irigaray, *J'aime à toi*, 172, my translation.

Luce Irigaray concludes that it is essential for feminist analysis to consider the fundamental instability of the *man-g*d* relationship. A subject can recognize and respect the specificity of, rather than appropriate, the other if an ideal horizon or genre reinforces the subject's identity. The appropriation of woman-as-lack/loss/less by *man* is related to the abandonment of *man* to a state of atrophy in relation to his patriarchal g*d. Further, that women in this system are left to languish results in their tendency to appropriate the other in turn, for appropriation occurs where "I" relate to the other in the gesture of "I ask myself if I am loved." Luce Irigaray indicts not only men but also women in this kind of relationship with the other; indeed, she argues that women's relation to the other is particularly apt to be appropriative, given woman's organization as lack in opposition to the masculine.¹⁹³ Luce Irigaray sees that women and men appropriate the other, differently, to prop up diminished or damaged identity. She alleges that the different ways men and women use language is emblematic of this appropriative mode of relating to the other. "The typical sentence produced by a male, once all substitutions have been allowed for, is: I wonder if I am loved or:

¹⁹³ Few note, however, that Luce Irigaray, in contradistinction to her philosophic and psychoanalytic traditions, understands both men and women in terms of lack. Women represent lack as the atrophied version of the masculine; *man* is differently seen as a variation on lack because of his appropriative identity structure. *Man* is represented in terms of presence

I tell myself that perhaps I am loved. The typical sentence produced by a woman is: Do you love me?"¹⁹⁴ She sees both forms of relationship to the other as flawed and appropriative, privileging neither over the other. The "male" speaker is not directed toward the other; rather, "the subject speaks to himself.... No place for words for the other here."¹⁹⁵ The *woman's* question is correlative to the question "Who am I?"¹⁹⁶; the subject's concern is not with the other but with the self. In neither utterance is there exchange or alliance between subjects; the possibility of true communication between self and other is foreclosed. Luce Irigaray interprets that this is because *man* is atrophy in relation to his g*d, his ideal, and woman is atrophy in relation to *man*. Atrophied subjects appropriate the other to tell themselves who they are or that they are loved; or to ask who they are and whether they are loved. They do not direct themselves outward but rather inward. Indeed, not only can they not communicate with the other, but also they can not acknowledge or respect her/his difference.

The negotiation and affirmation of two sexuate genres serve as mediating vertical dimensions in the context of which an individual is

and positivity *only through* the appropriation of both ideal and negative alter egos on which this depends. Thus *man* is simultaneously plentitude and atrophy, identity and lack.

¹⁹⁴ Luce Irigaray, "Love of the Other," in *Ethics*, 134.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

situated. Communication among subjects is facilitated, rather than appropriation of the other in the reassurance of the self. "I am often asked if man and woman will be able to communicate if two different genders [genres] are affirmed. Perhaps they will be communicating for the first time!"¹⁹⁷ Human relations need to be mediated by divine vertical planes because mediation between self and other enable respect for the other's alterity.

The Essential Thing Is...

We cannot afford to allow the vibrations of
death to continue to drown out the vibrations
of life...

-Luce Irigaray¹⁹⁸

Gender/genre leads me, inevitably, to a few provisional remarks about the debate still a-swirl around "essentialism" in Luce Irigaray's work. This term has been used to refer to:

¹⁹⁷ Luce Irigaray, "The Female Gender [Genre]," in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 120.

¹⁹⁸ Luce Irigaray, interview, in *French Philosophers in Conversation*, 78.

“the attribution of a fixed essence to women. Women’s essence is assumed to be given, universal, identified with biology and ‘natural’ characteristics or residing in certain given psychological characteristics – nurturance, empathy, supportiveness, or certain activities and procedures observable in social practices, intuitiveness, emotional responses, concern, and commitment to helping others, etc.”¹⁹⁹

In my reading, Luce Irigaray does not refer to a universal feminine essence, identified with women’s biology, but her appeal to an ideal whereby women could establish their subjectivity by situating themselves in the context of their sexuate genre might well read – and is often read – as an ideal for the unification and universalization of women by a shared singular subjectivity. Luce Irigaray’s comment that women are prevented in this world “from getting themselves together as a unit” seems to support this charge, though she stresses the *plurality* of selves who’d get themselves together.²⁰⁰ This works against the impression that her ideal is the sameness of those selves constituting a unit, an identity, a singularity; the unit of *genre* need not suppress the differences among the selves.

¹⁹⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, “A Note on Essentialism and Difference,” in *Feminist Knowledge*, 334.

²⁰⁰ Luce Irigaray, “Divine Women,” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 72.

Grosz goes on to explain that “essentialism entails that those characteristics defined as women’s essence are shared in common by all women at all times: it implies a limit on the variations and possibilities of change.”²⁰¹ If Luce Irigaray’s concept of genre represented an ideal whereby women were somehow unified by a feminine subjectivity conceived as singular, then this charge, signified by the label *essentialism* in Anglo-American feminist discourse, would apply. But Luce Irigaray emphasizes the infinity, the open-endedness of genre; in much of her argument the notion of women’s becoming – that is, life along the vertical axis – is synonymous with women’s divinity. Luce Irigaray does not mean to deploy any term that would limit the variations and possibilities of change. The concepts of genre, horizontal and vertical dimensions, and divinity are interwoven to articulate a dynamic ideal for women’s always incomplete identity.

Further, the term essentialism evokes an ideal of the sameness of women. If some characteristics are attributed to all women, then the differences among women are leveled in favor of descriptions of the ways women are alike. In promoting the concept of women’s genre, Luce Irigaray is clear that the concept refers to an ideal whereby women would

²⁰¹ Elizabeth Grosz, “A Note on Essentialism and Difference,” in *Feminist Knowledge*, 334.

not relate to one another in terms of sameness but of difference. She analyzes the social structures *man/g*d* and masculine/feminine as leading, precisely, to the exclusion of the other's difference through appropriation, through the subject's cultural abandonment to a position of lack. Women, routinely relegated to this position, are all the more likely to relate to one another in our culture as a variation of *themselves*, or in such terms that the *self* is the overriding consideration. Luce Irigaray uses and redefines of the concept of genre as a mediating factor, allowing radically open respect for the other.

Luce Irigaray's claim here is provocative and enormous and "grandiose"²⁰²: that there can be no reshaping of women's identity and subjectivity – indeed, of culture more generally – without reshaping our conceptions of divinity. She sees our cultural and historical context as inevitably leading a subject to exclude the other's alterity, then redefines divinity as that which would prohibit appropriative relations, that there might be respect among *all* humans of one another's agency and specificity.

²⁰² Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 36. "The largeness and speculative character of Irigaray's claims have always put me a bit on edge.... Her terms tend to mime the grandiosity of the philosophical errors that she underscores."

An Ethics of Wonder

The unceasing movement of two springs
feeding each other could be the pledge of
eternal happiness, could it not?

-Luce Irigaray²⁰³

Along with Luce Irigaray's more well-known deconstructive work which deploys analyses to jam the conceptual apparatus that drives phallogocentric renderings of g*d, there is a discourse on the divine in which she works toward some theo-political salvation for women. (Certainly she sees formulaic religious assurances of salvation and grace as forms of escapism and evasion of ethical responsibility.) In "Divine Women," "Belief Itself," and "Equal to Whom?," her rhetoric is designed to help women "construct a place for ourselves in the *air* for the rest of our time on earth – air in which we can breathe and sing freely, in which we can perform and move at will."²⁰⁴ A utopia inspiring hope, opening space for new questionings and questings, imaginings and namings, and to interrupting with bold strokes of creative reenvisioning the masculinist

²⁰³ Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover*, 37.

²⁰⁴ Luce Irigaray, "Divine Women," in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 66.

world of western theological discourse where constraint, confusion, and women's silence have traditionally been normative.

Luce Irigaray puts forth ethical frameworks to delineate this emergent, emancipatory vision of g*d. This new theology must author a discursive space in which the other is not consumed by a desire to establish any totalizing definition of subjectivity. Rather, this space must be one of love where two touch in an embrace which respects difference while also permitting the constitutive power of relation to flourish.

This other, male or female, should *surprise* us again and again, appear to us as *new, very different* from what we knew or what we thought he or she should be. Which means that we would look at the other, stop to look at him or her, ask ourselves, come close to ourselves through questioning. *Who art thou? I am and I become* thanks to this question. Wonder goes beyond that which is or is not suitable for us. The other never suits us simply. We would in some way have reduced the other to ourselves if he or she suited us completely. An *excess* resists: the other's existence and becoming as a place that permits union and/through resistance to assimilation

or reduction to sameness. Before and after appropriation, there is wonder.²⁰⁵

In order for wondrous, nondominating love to exist, the woman who loves must inhabit a space of subjectivity that cannot simply be reduced to the desire of the other; her relating must move out from a space in which self-love grounds her own desire and subjectivity. Luce Irigaray suggests that circumscribing the boundaries of this female identity remains so difficult for women because under the strictures of the male gaze, “we look at ourselves in the mirror to *please someone*, rarely to interrogate the state of our body or our spirit, rarely for ourselves in search of our own becoming.”²⁰⁶ For there to be wonder, there must be a self-referential gaze: “I have yet to unveil, unmask, or veil myself *for me* – to veil myself so as to achieve self-contemplation, for example, to let my gaze travel over myself so as to limit my exposure to the other and repossess my own gestures and garments, thus nestling back into my vision and contemplation of myself.”²⁰⁷ This is what is denied Mélusine, what is taken from her, by Raimondin’s intrusive gaze. Further, by repossessing her own gestures and garments, woman can create a nest or

²⁰⁵ Luce Irigaray, “Wonder: A Reading of Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*,” in *Ethics*, 74.

²⁰⁶ Luce Irigaray, “Divine Women,” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 65.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

envelope which, by containing subjectivity, makes it possible for her to love, enfold, and contain the other without sacrificing her own becoming: "She must lack neither body, nor extension within, nor extension without, or she will plummet down and take the other with her."²⁰⁸

Within the context of the two-fold ethical constraints of wonder and self-love, Luce Irigaray turns to the question of g*d and generates a vision of the divine which encourages both the construction of a space of subjective integrity for women and a relating to the other which is not predicated on a logic of consumption. For this vision of g*d she uses the elliptical language of women's continual self-touching in the caress of the two lips, a morphology in which one "thinks through mucous."²⁰⁹ She emphasizes immanence and indwelling; instead of imagining g*d as the immutable, transcendent Other who founds identity through the eclipse of difference, she shows this g*d as moving through and among women as spirit, "the respiration of lovers,"²¹⁰ as the "sensible transcendental" that "is not alien to the flesh,"²¹¹ but "surrounds them and envelopes them in the *jouissance*. Clothing them in that *porousness* and that *mucous* that they are."²¹² In this economy of exchange, g*d and woman touch and

²⁰⁸ Luce Irigaray, "Place, Interval: A Reading of Aristotle, *Physics IV*," in *Ethics*, 35.

²⁰⁹ Luce Irigaray, "Love of Same, Love of Other," in *Ethics*, 110.

²¹⁰ Luce Irigaray, "An Ethics of Sexual Difference," in *Ethics*, 129.

²¹¹ Luce Irigaray, "Love of Same, Love of Other," in *Ethics*, 110.

²¹² Luce Irigaray, "Love of Self," in *Ethics*, 69.

caress as two lips, rendering a knowledge that is undifferentiated from the relating which stirs it. Cast in the language of immanence, this g*d is both matter and movement, place and interval, within which subjectivity coalesces in time-space: "the infinite that resides within us and among us, the god in us, the Other for us, becoming with and in us."²¹³

The economy of exchange that produces these g*ds is a mirror image of the one Luce Irigaray so rigorously critiques in her readings of phallogentrism. According to that "old dream of symmetry,"²¹⁴ woman has no being/becoming of her own because she continually is positioned as an other who mirrors *man* back to himself, defining the borders of his identity and securing the stability of his presence. In this phallic economy, woman is both constructed and consumed by *man's* projective desire, reduced to a blank screen toward which he directs his narcissistic gaze. She is the fictive product of his subjectivity, a function of his need to be and to become. "To be the term of the other is nothing enviable. It paralyzes us in our becoming."²¹⁵ Given Luce Irigaray's critique of this discursive economy, it seems strange that she offers a g*d who, like woman, can be nothing more than a blank horizon or the term which serves the consumptive needs of the subject who requires an image of g*d

²¹³ Luce Irigaray, "Divine Women," in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 63.

²¹⁴ Throughout the essays in *Speculum of the Other Woman*.

²¹⁵ Luce Irigaray, "Divine Women," in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 71.

in order to become. If this indeed is what she's doing, she seems not to have thwarted but to have resurrected the logic of classical ontology and Enlightenment epistemology by putting g*d in the place traditionally held by woman. How far has Luce Irigaray moved the conversation? Her new g*d may be clothed in the garments of female desire, but this g*d still occupies the space of an empty sign, a blank screen of transcendence who can finally author nothing but the same. And when woman meets this g*d, she meets herself, thus remaining caught in the logic of discourse which as "a tight fabric...turns back upon the subject and wraps around and imprisons [her] in return."²¹⁶

Can this g*d secure the ethical constraints Luce Irigaray puts forth? Can this g*d encourage in practice both self-love and wondrous relation? This g*d will save women by authoring a space of becoming where relations are not conceived through a binary logic of dialectical loss and where fragmentation is not sublated as gain. This g*d will invite women to a new becoming by affirming the limits of their subjectivities, by giving boundaries to their presently fragmented and dissimulating selves – that is, by containing and enveloping and clothing them, as with skin, within a discursive receptacle that relishes the open coherence of unique

²¹⁶ Luce Irigaray, "An Ethics of Sexual Difference," in *Ethics*, 120.

differences. But can Luce Irigaray's g*d teach women to conceive of themselves so? What if the very g*d who is to author this contained subjectivity is herself without container or envelope, without a limited identity, who as the unenviable term of another is without skin, boundary, horizon, or historical particularity, who is nothing but infinite expanse, relation, space, interval. While urging women to imagine a g*d who will teach them self-love and containment, is Luce Irigaray describing a g*d incapable of a *divine* self-love because this g*d is nothing but an empty sign, not so unlike the one invoked by negative theologians, that functions only to contain the love of another? Luce Irigaray ties her rhetoric into a mobius strip, constructing an eschatological vision that, on the one hand, requires us to think our present in terms of subjective containment and, on the other hand, asks us to think that present through the future horizon of a g*d who, as a term of women's self-love, has no envelope, no incommensurable otherness.

There is similar complexity with Luce Irigaray's conceptualization of wonder. The discourse of containment – woman subjectively isolated in her own self-loving envelope – is matched with a discourse of g*d that leads the subject to reach out to the other in a wondrous caress. In that caress, difference is celebrated, mutual respect abounds, and woman

remains forever half-open to the transformative power of relation.²¹⁷ To inscribe a discourse of divinity in which such wonder can be imagined, Luce Irigaray must let wonder flow between woman and the g*d who beckons/welcomes her. For the relation between woman and G*d to be wondrous, mustn't there be division of two worlds, two definite space-times, two others? Only in difference is passage possible. This difference need *not* be in opposition or contradiction, as in the phallic economy of divine exchange. Rather, it exists when one meets the other "always as though for the first time."²¹⁸ But if g*d is a projection of woman's desire, such difference is repressed while assimilation is valorized, and the economy of exchange that ensues can prove consumptive and wounding: then, between g*d and woman, there would be no advent or event of the other. And what new story has begun? It is her story alone, not theirs, together. Is this the parousia that Luce Irigaray imagines in the future of woman? Her elaboration of wonder suggests not, indeed, but the question remains: can a religion in which there is no wonder between persons and g*d, incommensurably other, encourage an ethic of wonder between people?

²¹⁷ See Luce Irigaray, "Wonder," in *Ethics*, 75, for instance.

²¹⁸ Luce Irigaray, "Sexual Difference," in *Ethics*, 12.

If for men their God is dead, where can the
divine be spoken without preaching death?

-Luce Irigaray²¹⁹

"More or less transparent veils,"²²⁰ messengers and mediators, angels "have been misunderstood, forgotten, as the nature of that first veil, except in the work of poets, perhaps, and in religious iconography."²²¹ They allow messages to be transmitted "from the beyond"²²²: "If we do not rethink and rebuild the whole scene of representation, the angels will never find a home, never stay anywhere. Guardians of free passage, they cannot be captured, domesticated, even if our purpose is to see ourselves in them."²²³ Rilkean figures, read through Heidegger, angels bearing together in a disjunctive, impossible-to-think union the religious transcendence of spirituality with the material immanence of bodies. Go-betweens, they create passages between the unseen and the seen. As the figure whose appearance and disappearance children seek to control in

²¹⁹ Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover*, 20.

²²⁰ Luce Irigaray, "Belief Itself," in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 30.

²²¹ Ibid., 35.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid., 42.

their “first language game,” the mother “subsists before language . . . and beyond language.”²²⁴ She “remains the elemental substrate of life, existing before all forms, all limit, all skin, and of heaven, visible beyond-horizon. Between these extremes stand the angels and the annunciation of the fulfillment of the flesh.”²²⁵

Beyond the circularity of discourse, of the nothing that is in and of being. When the copula no longer veils the abyssal burial of the other in a gift of language which is neuter only in that it forgets the difference from which it draws its strength and energy. With a neuter, abstract *there is* giving way to or making space for a “we are” or “we become,” we live here” together.²²⁶

“To find the real,/ To be stripped of every fiction except one,/ The fiction of an absolute - Angel,/ Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear/ The luminous melody of proper sound.”²²⁷ But the real does not come forth: we still hear or read words, even when we are asked to pretend that those words have captured the “luminous melody of proper

²²⁴ Ibid., 46.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Luce Irigaray, “An Ethics of Sexual Difference,” in *Ethics*, 129.

²²⁷ Wallace Stevens, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.”

sound” as if spoken in the presence of the Angel of reality or of Rilke’s terrible angels. Language is the *douce campgana* of the thing. What one finds is what has always already been made. Poetry does not represent or imitate anything, except the movement of language itself. One does not look beneath the surface of predication to find substance, Aristotle’s οὐσία. The play is the matter of poetry, even when poets insist that their words have somehow captured the previously hidden x, have disgorged the beast and nourished it with the desperate milk of their craft. And it is that *matter* as a play of difference, as a movement between identity and otherness, as an excess of signification, with which reading resounds. Where Hegel juxtaposed Nature as the Other of *Geist* in and through which *Geist* was to come to knowledge of Itself as *Geist*, Luce Irigaray’s reading juxtaposes trope to trope, literal to figurative, within the brackets of a strictly transcendental process.

It is as difficult but as urgent to discuss the sex of a discourse as it is to discuss the sex of an angel: these two apparatuses of circulation and/or drift of meaning – one linguistic, the other cosmological – constantly avoid determinations as to their place, by means of the *quiproquo*: who has taken whose place? The celibatory machine’s narrative defines itself as *having a sex*; by virtue of the break creating its angelic

transparency, or its conventional coloring, say, it can induce a variety of effects based on what it places outside of itself, or the body/woman/subject. Its engine is this other, repressed with so much precision, and therefore, first and foremost, the reader. A number of characteristics confirm this rejection of the other, beginning with the refusal to use the power of recapitulating (man and woman) in human representation. This makes its discourse antimagical, areligious, and nonsymbolic: it does not play on the ability of words to get things going; rather than link together, it cuts apart; and finally, it deprives itself of any means of filling in the deficiency of the concept and concealing its gaps through the production of potential *symbols*.²²⁸ This practice of division gives the textual artifact the energy of what it methodically eliminates. But in the extant system, is it not the *male* divide that gives it its power – the violence of a writing whose eroticism increases with its *loss* of power (religious, cosmological, or political) over the other?

²²⁸ Daniel Sperber points out that a symbol is anything that marks the deficiency of a concept, in *Rethinking Symbolism*.

The Shape of Things To (Be)Come

For Irigaray the crisis that for Foucault spells
the death of philosophy is already over – she is
standing among the ruins and already sees
what is to come...

-Rosi Braidotti²²⁹

Let us invent together that which allows us to
live in and go on building the world,
beginning with this world that is each of us.

-Luce Irigaray²³⁰

Contra Audre Lorde's famous dictum that "*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*,"²³¹ much ballyhooed among American feminists, Luce Irigaray chooses to operate both from the *inside* and from the *outside*, from the margins, of philosophy, of theology, of politics, and "uses against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house."²³² She sets about "to destroy, but, as René Char wrote, with nuptial tools."²³³ What, after all, does she have to lose, excommunicated

²²⁹ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 129-130.

²³⁰ Luce Irigaray, "The Limits of Transference," in *Irigaray Reader*, 116.

²³¹ Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," *Sister Outsider*, 112.

²³² Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man," *Margins*, 135.

²³³ Luce Irigaray, "Questions," in *This Sex*, 150.

from Lacan's school (upon the publication of *Speculum*) and alienated from the church? Luce Irigaray's writing, and reading Luce Irigaray, is neither a historical given, nor a future triumph, but rather an event which rests on a certain number of preconditions including, in particular, the development of women's socio-political struggles. When dealing with issues such as religion and the divine, the revendication of equal rights is not enough; what is needed is the symbolic recognition of both sexes' access to and notions of the divine. A new symbolic system by and for women is needed; Luce Irigaray proposes the figure of the mother/daughter couple as starting point. Attacking the monosexed image of the Christian g*d, she emphasizes the importance for women of defining their own relationship to the divine. The Freudian unconscious serves as convenient metaphor for the divine. Few theologians are *conscious* of the ideological (and specifically misogynist) weight such a metaphor already carries. Proposing a mother g*d is potentially, once again, a substitution, a mere replacement of terms within an equation that is, still, controlled by men.

We need to become 'other' in relation to ourselves. And yet there is a threshold we should be aware of. In my view, it is marked by

sexual difference. Within the same sex, what usually rules is quantity. It is a question of leaving behind our comparative state, by perception, by the exercise and expression of our sexuality, our sensibility, and our minds, by living as subjects our relations to our mothers, to the universe, to other women, to other men.²³⁴

The theo-politico-philosophical question *par excellence*, What is to be done?, “must acknowledge the force of writing, its metaphoricity and its rhetorical discourse, as a productive matrix which defines the ‘social’ and makes it available as an objective of and for action.”²³⁵ Luce Irigaray demonstrates that there is a plurality of possible techniques, procedures, and methods within knowledges. She shows that there are always *other ways* of proceeding, other perspectives to be occupied and explored, than those contained within our history. The fact that a single contested paradigm (or a limited number) governs current forms of knowledge demonstrates the role that power, rather than reason, has played in developing knowledges. This power, although not as clearly visible as other forms of patriarchal coercion, is nonetheless integral to women’s containment within definitions constituted by and for men. Unlike

²³⁴ Luce Irigaray, “Equal to Whom?,” 72.

²³⁵ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 23.

phallogentric and patriarchal models, Luce Irigaray's work is openly proclaimed as *partial*, *partisan*, and *motivated*. It is a political intervention into a politically unacknowledged field of intellectual warfare. She uses guerrilla tactics: strategic forays into the enemies' camp, the camp defined by male theory,²³⁶ and skirmishes using the enemies' own weapons against them. For her, the crisis of reason does not represent an impasse, but rather a path for women to explore and judge for themselves. Her work is a facing up to the implications of this crisis to know, as women, the knower, as man has been and woman is now becoming. Her work poses questions about the *partiality* and the *sexualization* of all knowledges. It entails an acknowledgment of the sexually particular positions from which knowledges emanate and by which they are interpreted and used.

Luce Irigaray uses insights of Christianity against its manifest misogyny, finding there a model of the respect for the incarnation of all bodies (men's and women's) as potentially divine: nothing more or less than each man and each woman being virtually gods. In "Divine Women" she repeatedly spells out at least some of the conditions necessary for women to develop an autonomous self-conception, including a concept of

²³⁶ And that includes the encampment of most women theorists...

g*d and the divine as an historically possible future. Only if women have their *own* concepts of the divine can a divine fecundity between the sexes occur. The love of g*d is for her a love of the self, and this self-love is the prerequisite for love of the other. Self-love implies recognizing

- where we come from – women, mothers, all of us –
- where we are now – politically, philosophically – and
- a future in which we can become *more* than this – it is this that Luce Irigaray calls g*d.

“God forces us to do nothing except *become*. The only task, the only obligation laid upon us is: to become divine men and women, to become perfectly, to refuse to allow parts of ourselves to shrivel and die that have the potential for growth and fulfillment.”²³⁷

Luce Irigaray calls women and feminists not to give up on g*d-talk but to engage critically and creatively in collective reimaginings. That she so clearly gestures toward the divine in her work invites theologians to struggle with her theoretical insights into the role of gender in the construction of divine rhetorics without having to overcome the antireligious bias one finds in much current feminist theory. Too, Luce Irigaray’s work is situated on the outer margins of christian discourse, a

²³⁷ Luce Irigaray, “Divine Women,” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 68-69.

location which allows her to push questions and issues that theologians who feel the constraints of church commitments might miss or might hold themselves back from.

The positive connotation of the masculine gender, the gender of words, is tied to the impact of the establishment of the patriarchy, and in particular to the appropriation of divinity by men. This is not a minor question. It is a very important one. Without divine power, men would not have been able to supplant the relationship between mother and daughter, and its consequences in nature and society. But man becomes God by giving himself an invisible father, a father tongue. Man becomes God as Word, and as Word made flesh. Sperm, whose power in the procreation process is not immediately visible, is relayed through the linguistic code, the logos.²³⁸

As activist and political rhetorician, Luce Irigaray continually positions her work vis-à-vis communities of women who are struggling against the oppressive logic of phallogentrism and its conception of the

²³⁸ Luce Irigaray, interview, *French Philosophers in Conversation*, 65.

divine, yet her principal audience has been and continues to be academic feminists whose disciplinary interests rarely lead them to construct liturgies and other socially-enacted rhetorics designed to test the practical force of Luce Irigaray's theological reflections. Such is not the case, however, with feminist theologians whose peculiar ecclesiastic commitment requires them to locate their reflections in the context of active, worshipping communities. Thus, it is possible that feminist theologians could help to provide Luce Irigaray's writings with the audience they need but are institutionally, culturally, or stylistically unable to reach, an audience both to encourage and to challenge her stances. "Can this androgyny blaze a trail for an intergender ethics? If it exists, this trail must use sexual difference as both its setting out point and its destination, must take advantage of sexual difference on the road to spiritual discovery and affirmation."²³⁹ What would this culture of sexual difference be? What would be changed?

"Grace that speaks silently through and beyond the word?"²⁴⁰

²³⁹ Luce Irigaray, "The Female Gender," in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 123.

²⁴⁰ Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover*, 190.

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